“But you, Lord Snow, you’ll be fighting their battles forever.” Ser Alliser Thorne

Every time he died his last in that life he awoke again in another at the exact moment of Ghost’s birth.
choose what I like from that season to mesh into my already mostly plotted story.

The main thing is Aegon VI is Jon's half brother in ALL lives he's lived. Jon will NOT bear that name in any life in this fic. If you're a TV show only fan and new to fanfiction I will laugh at you if you try to tell me Jon's real name should be Aegon in this story. Even if GRRM makes it so in the books (and justifies it properly), I still won't rewrite this story. I have too many Jons, I'm not going to double my Aegons.

Pairings: DON'T ASK. They will develop within the story. GRRM doesn't warn for his pairings at the start of a book, I won't warn for mine. In the flashback multiple pairings with random characters will occur. They are not necessarily indicative of Jon's main timeline pairing. It will NOT be Daenerys or Arya. This is not a slash fic either.

This started out as a self prompt "Jon Snow: Live. Die. Repeat" that morphed into time travel fix it + wish-fulfillment somehow.

I wrote this for fun and as an exercise to get myself to write. This has not been beta read or looked over by anyone but me. Please advise if I get any GOT terminology incorrect.

There will be a mix of TV Show and book canon. There will be some "Fanon" elements here and there. Details vary life to life. Some characters will be a bit OOC or aged up slightly.

09/22/19: NOT abandoned. See the end notes for the most recent info on what is going on. Life happens, but I do try and communicate my still living status.

See the end of the work for more notes.
“But you, Lord Snow, you’ll be fighting their battles forever.”
Ser Alliser Thorne

“Jon!”

Hands tugged at him, lifting his head and shoulders from the biting cold of the sludge beneath him. The cold seeping through his veins, radiating from the throbbing pain in his chest, only increased.

“No. No. Don’t—Jon.” His name was bitten out in an almost sob, such deep emotion spurring him to force his eyes open.

After a moment, he could focus on the bright violet eyes of his brother. A strand of silver hair glittered in the dim light between them having fallen out of the cord Aegon used to keep it back when riding Viserion.

“Aeg—” Jon managed to cough out. The pain once biting was dulling to a dull ache.

“You promised to show me Winterfell, brother. We were supposed to go there together.” Aegon’s fingers clenched on his shoulders before he reached one hand down to grasp Jon’s right hand.

It was a promise Jon loathed to break. He had so hoped to have a happy ending here, with as much family as he could find. Bran was at Winterfell at least. The Starks would live on through him and Meera, Jon was sure. Arya and Rickon were still missing, but they had heard things and had ideas on where to look for them.

“Are—is—” Jon gasped a bit, struggling to focus as his vision was blurring gray at the edges.

Something wet fell against his cheek. “Yes, brother, Spring will come. You did it.”

“We.” Jon did his best to tighten his fingers against Aegon’s.

“We,” Aegon acknowledged. “All of us. Together.”

There was a beat of silence between them and to Jon, the sounds of battle around them, of Viserion’s mournful hisses and cries in the distance, grew quieter. The pain was almost gone now.

“Ar—Ar—”

“I’ll find her. Her and Rickon.” Aegon’s fingers clenched his tightly. “I promise.”

The hazy image of his brother faded, disappearing into the black fog of death.

“Ghost.”
Jon gasped deep, curling upward as a phantom memory of pain merged with dull ache of sudden hurt as something landed on his chest. He spluttered and gasped, eyes flying open as a familiar laugh reached his ears.

He clenched his hands on the shoulders of the small form on his chest, small fingers poked and prodded at his shoulders. Swallowing his first reactions—physical and vocal—Jon focused on the form hovering over him.

“Arya?”

“Come on! Get up!” She bounced back on the bed, pouting at him. “Nellwyn is having her pups!”

“Nellwyn?” Jon’s eyebrows furrowed as he looked over to his brother. They were still in the room they’d shared near the nursery before Lady Stark had forced them to move to more ‘adult’ rooms when Rickon neared his first name day.

“The direwolf Father brought back on the hunt last week,” Robb raised an eyebrow as he pulled on his boots. “Arya’s been trying to convince Father to name it that.”

“It’s having pups! We’re going to have direwolves like the Starks of old!” She smiled at him brightly showing off several missing teeth. She’d lost one around her sixth name day or so, falling from a tree.

“That’s just Old Nan’s stories, Arya,” Robb ruffled her hair as he came up behind her. Her braids had mostly come undone already.

She glared at him for a moment before shifting on her feet, heels bouncing impatiently. “Hurry up,” she turned to Jon again, “or we’ll miss the birth!”

“All right,” Jon smiled at her as he moved to stand, pulling on a shirt that lay on the floor near his bed. If Robb was just going with the basics so would he. “All right. Did you wake up Sansa?”

Arya wrinkled her nose before grinning. “Not yet.” The ‘do I have to?’ evident in her tone and expression.

He caught one of his boots, thrown to him by Robb, and shoved his foot inside. Jon already knew they had missed at least one of the births—he wouldn’t be here otherwise.

“Go wake up Sansa, Arya,” Robb said and she rolled her eyes before running from the room.

“I hope father does not try to lay the blame on us. I don’t want to be held responsible for Arya being awake at this hour,” Jon mumbled around a yawn as he followed his brother—cousin in truth, but to him, Robb would always be his brother—to the door. The words slipped out before he could stop them. *I don’t want Lady Stark to blame me.* In nearly every iteration she held the same view of him.

Robb glanced at him knowingly. “We won’t get in trouble.”

He sighed and following at Robb’s heels as Sansa screeched at Arya down the hall.

Excitement bubbled within him as his mind crossed over to fully awake. He hadn’t seen Ghost in nearly five moons and his companion’s absence had been a physical ache within him. It always was when the wolf died before he did. It had only taken him five lives to realize that it didn’t matter when his companion died, but he always arrived when Ghost was born.
Jon was right. Four pups were already born by the time they reached the kennel. It was shocking to see the size of the mother wolf, let alone see her alive and in relatively good shape. She had a healing injury to her shoulder that he assumed could be attributed to the boar Robb mentioned.

Lord Stark was there with her, kneeling in the straw near her head, one hand stroking gently in the rough fur behind her ears. They were greeted with a tired smile and a raised eyebrow.

Arya nearly ran into the stall, but Jon grabbed her arm and held her near the door, standing behind her as Robb slid past them. Sansa had grumbled the entire way but she had come along after forcing them to wait even longer, to Arya’s annoyance, as she made herself ‘presentable’.

“It’s so messy!” Sansa squeaked next to him, shuffling her feet as she eyed the mess in the straw.

Their father laughed, looking impossibly young. Jon had to force his eyes away towards the small forms next to the large wolf. She was in the middle of birthing another, he could tell, four forms already mostly cleaned and laying near her chest, squirming and squeaking. The moment his eyes landed on Ghost’s pale form the world shifted and clicked into place. He was smaller than the rest, nestled against the largest—a small form Jon was certain was Grey Wind.

“Aye, birthing is messy business no matter what creature is doing it.”

“I never want to do it,” Arya announced after a moment of silence, voice sure.

Jon couldn’t help but grin slightly. Ironically in most of the lives he’d lived Arya had been the only Stark to have a child. It was quite true that she had never been happy about the process, though, cursing her paramour loudly and with vulgarity that shocked Jon no matter how much he’d seen the few times he’d been present when his nephews or nieces were born.

The mother wolf finished cleaning the fifth pup—Summer—Jon realized and gently maneuvered it next to the other four, nosing each gently. She paused over Ghost and Jon clenched is fists. Her eyes lifted and met his for a long moment and Jon’s breath caught.

Lord Stark frowned and then smiled slightly as the mother wolf acknowledged the little, white as snow pup with a light nudge and gentle lick before checking on the others. A few minutes later the next and last pup was being forced into the world.

“Six pups,” Robb said and grinned over at Jon after Shaggydog was born. Searching his new memories Jon realized Rickon had been born barely moons ago. “One for each of the Stark children.”

Sansa made a soft noise, almost protesting, but was caught up in Lord Stark motioning her over to greet the pups, following Robb.

She was immediately drawn to Lady’s small form, stroking a gentle finger over her small head. “Can we keep them, Father?”

“You’ll train them yourselves,” he said after a moment fingers burrowed in the mother wolf’s scruff. “Do not come here by yourselves until they are weaned and don’t argue. This one is wild, no matter how tame she’s been acting with me. I don’t want to have to fight your mother over this.”

“Even with the kennel door closed?” Sansa asked, she was staring at the wriggling pile of pups
with a focus Jon didn’t remember her having at this age.

Lord Stark paused for a moment before speaking. “If the door is shut and locked. You are to stay back from the gate if she comes near.” As if to argue with his caution, the mother wolf nudged his empty hand with her nose, tongue coming out to kiss it gently. “Do you agree to these terms?”

“Yes!” They all agreed quickly, Arya’s voice the loudest.

They had been bundled off to bed not long after their father accepted vows from each of them separately on the matter, each also having paced forward to gently touch one of the pups. Jon had been the last; Robb hovered at the door as he stepped forward at Lord Stark’s urging.

The words came unbidden to Jon’s lips. “I’m not a Stark.”

“You have my blood,” Lord Stark corrected him. “You may not have my name but you are a Stark.” A gentle smile graced his lips as he nodded toward the pile of pups. “You’ve had your eye on one of these since you arrived. Come and greet him.”

Jon tried not to lose his footing as he moved forward quickly, pausing just in front of the small pack eyes meeting the mother wolf’s eyes, asking permission, before he knelt. Ghost was so small, smaller than Jon had ever seen him. When he touched the pale silky fur, it was still damp to the touch.

“Hello, Ghost,” Jon murmured. Hello again, old friend, I’ve missed you.
Winterfell itself almost perfectly matched his memories, a picture of bustling activity and happiness. Jon’s heart ached as he saw a familiar face, faces long gone to him—dead dozens of times over—alive and well. One of the servant’s daughters, a girl named Gwelda whose blood he could remember painting the snow at in front of the stables in more than one life, blushed prettily at his attention, causing him to glance away awkwardly.

It was early yet, the sun barely gracing the edges of the sky, painting a pretty picture of golds and blues with a bit of purple fading into gray in the west. Jon pulled his cloak close to himself, less to ward off the chill and more to feign bashfulness. He needed to gain control of his reactions, figure out what was the norm for twelve-year-old Jon Snow, but it was difficult as he couldn’t remember the last time he’d been twelve; all his lives had started years past this point.

The Godswood was blessedly empty, silent but for the early morning birds twittering the news of dawn to their fellows. Dew glistened across the grass and a field mouse sped away from the water’s edge as he neared the small pond. The Heart Tree was as majestic as every other time he saw it, drawing him in. He knelt before it, staring up at the crying face, taking in every detail; each groove, bump, and divot carving itself deep into Jon’s soul as he faced it.

In some lives, especially at first, he had forsaken Gods—screamed and cursed every single one he knew of from the Old to the New, R’hllor, the Drowned God, every one he could name and those he could not. Then he spent lives devoting his time to each, begging to be set free of this curse. Not once had his prayers been answered. Whichever God that had seen fit to curse him didn’t want to set him free.

His last attempt at following a path of devotion, he’d attempted to follow what was Arya’s usual path. Jon attempted to become no one only to fail as he had lived too many lives; his sense of identity was too ingrained to become no one.

Jon sighed, bowing his head and resting one hand on a pale root before closing his eyes. He prayed then, focusing his thoughts on the Old God’s who he’d followed since that last failed attempt at begging a deity that wasn’t his.

Every life he lived had been nearly identical in detail at the beginning until this one, at least for the most part. The only differences he’d ever truly detected stemmed from his birth father’s bloodline. At first, it was just Jon’s eyes, drifting between grey, brown, and a grey-violet hazel from world to world—they were grey in this one—but then that was the most easily noticed detail for him. Perhaps there were other changes but they were more difficult to detect and didn’t intersect with his usual paths often.

It wasn’t just his eyes, sometimes his siblings lived. Every few lives Aegon could be found in Essos, preparing to mount an attack on Westeros, training to be a King. It wasn’t always Aegon though, several times Jon had gone to meet his brother only to find a Blackfyre pretender propped up in his likeness.

He prayed that wouldn’t happen in this life.

As for Rhaenys, Jon had only met her once but she’d lived during three of his lives; once with Aegon and twice in Sunspear. She had grown into a beautiful woman and although standoffish she had accepted him, allowing him to be an uncle to her son and daughter. They had been the three
heads of the dragon in that world—Daenerys had been killed by a Warlock while negotiating for Unsullied.

Jon focused his thoughts again, praying for guidance and his family—prayed that Aegon would live at least and Daenerys would be safe until they met again. He prayed that Viserys would be kinder to her though he knew that was for naught. He prayed for the Starks, for Samwell, Ygritte and Tormund, and for the Giants. Names upon names filtered through his mind, a long-practiced rote for him, a list of friends and allies he cared for or needed.

At last, he turned back to this life, praying for advice on how to handle his current situation. He’d never come back this far before. He was years younger than any other life and, for the first time, the mother wolf had lived longer than a few breaths.

She was living and seemingly bonded to Lord Stark.

This scenario was too different; everything about it caused his head and heart to ache. He couldn’t trust in the knowledge of hundreds of lives here. Any move he made could change so much…was it a blessing? An opportunity to prevent more deaths? Or a curse to watch more die?

Was it one more cruel way to torment him, to cause him pain after a winning streak of a dozen or so lives in the fight for Dawn?

What could a twelve-year-old bastard do that an adult couldn’t?

Caution was something Jon should have in spades by now, especially when stepping upon untried paths and meeting with people he’d only heard vague tales of. Assuming Viserys—his uncle—would be anything like the rest of the Targaryens he’d met has been a horrible mistake. One that Jon certainly planned on never making again.

The man was a coward and mad, but smart. In a straight fight, he never could have beaten Jon. If Ghost hadn’t gone hunting, Viserys would have died the second he pulled the dagger from his belt.

But here they were, Viserys leaning over him grinning wickedly, his silver hair gleaming in the dim firelight and his violet eyes filled with hate. Jon should have asked Daenerys more about her brother before ever attempting to intervene in their paths.

Viserys scowled at him, pressing the dagger flush against the thin skin above Jon’s jugular. The drug Viserys had poisoned him with was roaring through his blood, keeping him in place as pain lanced through his nerves but his muscles were lax, any useful movement prevented.

“It’s all your whore of a mother’s fault,” Viserys growled at him digging the dagger deep enough a few drops of blood spilled onto the edge of the blade.

Jon was so stupid, stupid and complacent, to allow things to get to this point. All he had wanted to do was to live a life with his other family. He had crossed an ocean for this, spurning his Stark heritage outside of Ghost to see what good he might do at Daenerys’ side. It had been so sweet to see her before she had been hardened into a Queen; into a conqueror.

“If it hadn’t been for her—for you—I wouldn’t be here surrounded by filthy barbarians waiting for them to take back my throne. I would have a palace, armies, and people kneeling to me across the seven kingdoms.”
No, Jon thought. No. Your father, your brother, or Aegon would have those. Not you. Never you.

“You’re nothing more than a bastard trying to steal my throne,” Viserys narrowed his eyes, “I don’t care if you’re my nephew. Traitor blood runs through your veins, bastard. I can’t have you influencing my sister and stealing my birthright. Rhaegar would have understood.”

The cold metal bit into his throat and Jon choked a bit as dampness spread across his skin and onto his chest. A moment later, as Jon’s vision began to blur, a white blur leapt with a growl through the entry of the tent and slammed into the mad, beggar king.

Viserys screamed and as Jon’s mind began to fade away he made a silent vow.

Jon would never allow Viserys to sit on the throne in any life he lived.

Jon had personally arranged Viserys’ assassination in at least fifteen lives.

The first time it was done too early and Daenerys never hatched her dragons. He was careful not to let that happen again.

Trying to fit into a new world seamlessly was nigh impossible, no matter how much he tried Jon never could perfectly imitate a younger version of himself. Seven and ten, five and ten, his teenage years had always been difficult for him to transition to from an independent adult life. Two and ten was another challenge altogether. He had dropped into this body when it was amid changing from boy to man, early in the transition at that, bones growing and limbs gangly, voice squeaking oddly at times.

What might have bothered him the most, though, was just how short he was compared to Robb and Theon at this age. He knew that height was not something he would ever best anyone at, but by six and ten he had been only an inch or so shorter than his brother a fact that hadn’t changed even after another growth spurt near the time he turned eight and ten. Robb had grown then as well.

“Ready to eat dirt, bastard?” Theon’s shoulder bumped into his, the Ironborn grinning cockily at him. It wasn’t exactly a nice grin, but then Theon had never been nice to Jon in any life.

Even when Jon’s parentage was revealed early Theon’s dislike for him just changed reasons. At least at this point, it could be attributed to the boy grasping at someone that could be counted as ‘below’ him.

“Who’s to say I shall be the one eating dirt?” Jon shot back, squaring his shoulders, fingers tightening around the pommel of his practice sword. He missed Longclaw and Dark Sister—Blackfyre even, though he had rarely wielded it. It was Aegon’s sword more oft than not when it crossed his path.

“I am!” Theon smiled as he fully turned to face him, spreading his arms wide. “I will make you eat it.”

“Not today, Theon.” Ser Rodrik settled a large hand on the young man’s head, startling him. “I want you to work with Jory today. He’s going to run you through the footwork you’ve been having difficulty with.”
“Jon, you’ll be sparing with Robb.” He nodded towards Robb as the boy jogged up, slightly out of breath. His lessons with father must have run over. While Jon and even Theon and Bran, although far behind the older boys, shared most lessons with Robb, there were always a few times a week that Lord Stark spent solely with his heir. Jon knew that was something that would change as Bran grew older; the man had learned from the death of his father and siblings that the line of succession was far from guaranteed.

Jon had joined in many times when he was younger until the disapproving words and gaze of Lady Stark and caused his lessons to dwindle. He had taken all his father’s words to heart, inked them deep in his memory, using them in the lives where he’d been Lord Commander, King of the North, Robb’s Hand, and a myriad of other positions. But he could never stop wondering how much better of a leader he could have been if he had attended all of Robb’s lessons.

Jon groaned sometime later as he lost balance, slipping and falling onto the damp earth.

“You all right?” Robb asked him, extending a hand, a concerned frown twisting his freckled features. “You’ve spent more time in the mud than on your feet today.”

Jon clasped his brother’s arm and allowed himself to be pulled upright. His brother was only slightly exaggerating. Once upright he pressed a hand to his hip and winced, feeling the bruise growing there. “Growing pains s’all. My balance has been a bit off.”

“Maybe you’ll catch up with me yet,” Robb japed, attempting to scruff his hand over Jon’s head.

Jon ducked away, nearly slipping in the damp dirt, which wasn’t helping him any either. He desperately needed to slip away and practice his swordsmanship soon and often. Muscle memory and the memory of muscle memory were warring in his body and mind.

He could hear Greyjoy laughing at him, he had given the boy quite a bit of entertainment today and he didn’t want to provide too many repeat experiences. While his ego may be near non-existent these days Jon also didn’t want to allow the Ironborn to best him for long at swordplay.

“I hope so,” Jon groused at the sore point. Even Sansa had been slightly taller than him as adults. At least Arya hadn’t bested his height.

“I think that’s enough for now, boys.” Ser Rodrik took pity on Jon a while later after a dozen more falls. “Take some time later to practice your footwork, Jon, I know you’re growing but you’re sloppy today.”

“Yes, Ser.” Jon nodded and moved to put away his practice equipment.

“And get yourself to the Maester before going to the dining room. Have him check you for anything more serious than bruises and growing pains,” the master-at-arms ordered him, “I don’t want your father upset because you let an injury go untended.”

Jon nodded, inwardly cursing his half-grown body. He ached all over, but contrary to what Ser Rodrik requested he would tend to himself as he did in most lives. There were some liberties he wasn’t quite ready yet to allow others, even a Maester, take with him and being examined by Maester Luwin for injuries would encompass most of them.

Checking for watchful eyes, not wanting to get in a confrontation with the knight, Jon made his way to the kennels. He felt drawn there still by the strengthening bond to Ghost. He could feel the pup’s contentment in the back of his mind helping to ease his own emotions.

Arya was leaning against the metal gate when he arrived, fingers clenched around bars as she
stared at the mother direwolf and her pile of pups. She was keeping her promise at least as the door was locked and the wolves far from the door.

He stopped next to her, eyes finding Ghost's small form nestled between Shaggy and Summer.

“What do you think of Visenya?” Arya asked, looking up at him. “Or Rhaenys?”

Jon startled a little at the names but smiled. “Both are good, strong names.” He raised an eyebrow, looking back at her. “But I’m not sure naming a wolf after a dragon would be appropriate.”

Lips twisting in thought, she nodded. “Nymeria?”

“We’re talking about your wolf and not the mother, right?”

“Mine,” Arya scowled, “Father says he’ll name the mother if she decides to stay.”

“She’s a wild animal,” Jon said after a moment’s consideration. “Not a pet to be kept. We’re just helping her for now. She’ll be healed soon.”

“Do you think the pups will leave with her?” Arya squeaked, horrified at the idea.

The mother direwolf lifted her large head from its pillow of straw causing a raucous of whines as her body shifted, dislodging some of the pups from their meals. Jon met her golden eyes.

“No,” he stated firmly, “I think the pups will stay no matter her decision.”

"I hope so." Arya's fingers tightened around the gating.

“Arya,” Robb called out to her as he walked up a few minutes later, “Septa Mordane is looking for you.”

“You didn’t tell her where I am, did you?” she groaned, peaking down the kennel hall.

“I didn’t know you were here until just now,” Robb said stopping behind her to look over her head. “How are the pups?”

"Doing well from the looks of things," Jon replied mentally prodding Ghost who brushed against his mind, completely content with his current circumstance. The pup had latched back onto one of his mother's nipples and was feasting again.

"I wonder how long it will take for them to get as big as their mother?" Robb mused.

"Maester Luwin says it could take years," Arya was the one to answer, "but that no one knows for sure because no one has written much on them."

"Perhaps he'll be the one to do so, then." Robb glanced down at his sister and then frowned. "Arya, Mother is going to be upset with you if you don't at least put some effort into your studies with the Septa today."

"I went earlier!"

"I think he means for things like embroidery and the like," Jon tugged on a braid, "not just for history and writing." He leaned in close to whisper in her ear. "I won't be able to teach you how to wield a blade if your Lady Mother is cross with you over avoiding other lessons."

She gasped, drawing away from him, eyes wide. "Really?"
"Yes," Jon said, standing straight. At her doubting look, he continued, "I promise."

"You swear?" she prodded again. "To the Old Gods?"

"And the New."

They laughed as she ran off, skidding through stray clumps of straw.

"You aren't going to drag me into those lessons, are you?" Robb asked leaning next to him, bumping their shoulders together.

"Course I am," Jon grinned, dodging the punch his brother threw at him. "I have to have someone to lay the blame on if your Lady Stark gets mad at me," he said before running off, Robb on his heels.
“Grey Wind?” Jon asked, startled, drawing his horse up short and causing the column of riders behind him to pause—a tidal wave of movement halting behind him.

His brother’s direwolf stood before them in the middle of the road, larger than his own and covered in muck and blood. Its eyes were unnaturally colored and staring straight at him. A pit grew in the bottom of his stomach.

Ghost glided forward to meet his brother, slow and calculated in his movement instead of the usual exuberant puppy behavior he usually exhibited when meeting one of his siblings after a prolonged absence.

Jon had been leading his army back south after routing the Ironborn from Moat Cailin and preventing them from making their way to Winterfell. He had left a small garrison and organized things to keep a repeat attempt from being successful as well.

The moment Grey Wind appeared though, Jon knew all his careful maneuvering in this life had failed. Something had gone wrong while he was parted from Robb and his brother was gone.

“Jon?” Dacey Mormont asked, pulling her horse up next to him.

“Scouts,” he stated, “I want outriders checking for signs of armies. Tell them not to trust who they see,” he paused before turning to meet her gaze, “especially Bolton’s and Frey’s.”

In the end, it hadn’t been either family that led the betrayal.

The Karstarks had taken affront to the death of their Lord and Robb’s choice of paramour after he spurned Alys Karstark.

“Father?” Jon couldn’t help shuffling his feet, barely preventing himself from staring at the toe of his boot while it scuffed across the dirt. Interrupting Lord Stark at prayer hadn’t been his first choice, but after a fortnight of being thwarted at getting alone time with Lord Stark since making his choice on what path to take in this life, he hadn’t much of a choice. He wanted as much time to improve this world as he could get.

This path was one he had chosen only twice before, always with only a few moons until the royal party would arrive. This time he had, hopefully, years to travel it instead.

“May I speak with you privately?” Jon asked and after a short pause added, “Please?” He knew Lord Stark had been near done with his prayer, getting ready to end it and stand. The impatience of youth had prevented him from waiting that long though.

There was a pause, Lord Stark staying in his position for a minute longer before he stood and turned to face him.

“Of course, Jon.” A smile graced his lips for a moment before morphing into concern. “Is something wrong?”
Jon glanced around, eyes checking their immediate vicinity, finding no one as he already knew he
would. The route he had taken through the Godswood had allowed him to check everywhere for
prying ears before he approached Lord Stark.

“Yes . . . and no,” he started, eyes moving up to meet the steel gray eyes of the man who had raised
him. There was no easy way to do this. After having run it through his head over and over,
remembering what his previous attempts had taught him, he had decided that getting straight to the
point would be the best route. “I—I woke up when Ghost, my direwolf, was born. I woke up with
memories I should not have. Memories of lives lived, my lives but not. This life over and over
again but with different choices made.”

Lord Stark’s brow furrowed as Jon spoke and he opened his mouth, but Jon did not let him find his
voice.

“I woke up in a new life following my last death in my previous life at the moment Ghost was born.
I’ve lived dozens, hundreds of lives,” Jon barreled on, lifting his chin up as he tried to ignore how
his hands shook, clenching them into fists at his side, “I only have words available to me to attest
to my claims. Knowledge is all the Gods send with me.” He paused, taking a deep breath, gaze
dropping to stare at Lord Stark’s feet. “Memories and Ghost are all the comfort I’m allowed
through this curse, Uncle.”

There was a sharp intake of breath and his uncle shifted before him; a long silence stretched
between them for minutes interrupted only by the occasional bird twittering and squirrel chattering
in wood nearby.

It seemed as if an eternity passed before his uncle moved forward and a hand touched his chin,
lifting it until he was forced to meet his gaze. Grey eyes searched his face as if trying to peer into
his very soul.

Lord Stark’s face was made of ice, emotions hidden behind the blankest of looks. Jon couldn’t
read him and he was glad of that. At the same time, he was also terrified.

“How do you know?” His uncle’s voice was rough emotion that his face belied seeping through.

“Different ways,” Jon answered honestly. It would do him no good to lie. “The first time I was told
by Bran, who saw my birth in a vision. Lord Reed confirmed its truth. A few times I met my wet
nurse, Wylla, as I traveled south for war or in attempts to find a better path. Most often Lord Reed
spoke of it when we met.” He swallowed thickly. “Five times I forced you to speak of it.”

And each of those times he’d fled to Essos, using it as an excuse.

“And if you die or I die before we meet again?” Jon glared, anger bursting inside him like wildfire
and he doubted he would be able to douse it.

“What happens will happen. Do not ask me again.” The horse shifted to the side beneath Lord
Stark, hoof stamping and kicking up dust. “Now is not the time nor place.”

“When will be?” Jon asked bitterly, knowing the answer. “Perhaps I should ride south instead of
north, visit Dorne and find my answers there if you will not speak of it.”

“No. If you do not join the Night’s Watch that is your choice. But I forbid you from going south.”

“You would forbid me from seeking out my mother’s family?” Jon laughed humorlessly. “I cannot stay in Winterfell, I cannot go south, I cannot stay with my family here, but I’m not allowed to seek out any other family I may have.”

Lord Stark’s jaw clenched, eyes squeezing shut.

“Should I drive a dagger through my heart now?” Jon continued voice harsh and filled with emotion long buried. “It seems I don’t belong anywhere but with thieves, rapists, and murderers in the eyes of you and Lady Stark. If not the Wall I may as well be dead, then. Perhaps it would be a kinder fate for a bastard like me.”

“You have no family in the South, Jon.” Lord Stark opened his eyes and sighed. “You would only find death there.”

“Her name?” His uncle dropped his hand onto Jon’s shoulder, gripping tightly.

“Lyanna Stark,” Jon stated, voice a hushed whisper, “and my father the Dragon who stole her.”

His uncle moved forward, settling his other hand on his shoulders as well, bracketing him as he looked down at him. Jon felt impossibly young in that moment, young and small.

“I should have been the one to tell you,” his uncle squeezed his shoulders gently, his voice filled with emotion that broke the mask, “I am sorry that I wasn’t.”

Jon’s jaw dropped for a second, eyes widening. “You—You believe me?”

Bringing a hand to Jon’s face, his uncles touched his cheek lightly, once and then twice and then settled it on the side of his face and neck. “You have never been one to jape,” he smiled sadly at Jon, “and this is not knowledge that many have. Only three people still living knew it before now. And none would tell.”

He dropped his hand back to Jon’s shoulder and sighed. “I cannot say if I believe the whole of what you speak, but I would hear more before I draw conclusions.” His uncle glanced away, eyes drifting over the tree line. “But not here,” he continued, “this is not a conversation that should be had where wind can carry whispers.”

Jon nodded and dropped his gaze again, glancing off to the side. “Where then?”

“After dinner come to my solar. We’ll speak then,” he said, gathering himself and moving towards the path to the courtyard.

“Thank you, Uncle,” Jon murmured, nodding his agreement to the timing.

“And Jon?”

Jon lifted his head and turned to face him.

“You’ve been my son since the moment I first held you. You won’t ever stop being my son. Don’t
Eyes widening, a smile curled its way onto his features, true happiness shining through his broken mask.

“Thank you . . . Father.”

Ned nodded again, returning the affection with a tight smile, heartfelt but warring with the thoughts and confusion their conversation had wrought. He left the Godswood then to attend to the day’s business.

Jon stayed for another hour, just standing in the clearing, feeling the light breeze as it brushed through his curls and across his face, listening to the noise of the leaves clashing with each other gently in a never-ending battle. He stood there until a servant came to fetch him for lessons with Maester Luwin.
Lady Catelyn stayed at dinner for mere moments that night before asking a servant to bring her meal upstairs. Rickon was fussing more than usual, an illness of some type causing him discomfort and making his cries shrill. Everyone was thankful for the silence when they left and dinner was a great deal quieter than normal.

His father was lost in thought, picking at his meal and staring into nothingness. Barely halfway through the food set on his plate, he stood and bid them good evening before reminding Jon to meet him in his solar once he had finished eating.

“What was that about?” Robb asked, elbowing Jon in the side after their father left.

Jon shrugged, spearing a chunk of potato. “I asked if we could speak privately earlier.”

“About . . .”

“Private things.”

“Jon.” Robb scowled at him, narrowing his eyes. The look on his face plainly stating he would not be letting this go if he didn’t get a satisfying answer.

“About the future,” Jon sighed, “my future.” He turned is focus back to his plate, trying to force himself to eat more. He couldn’t feel the hunger he knew should be there, his nerves frayed.

“Is Father going to have you fostered?” Sansa asked, piping up from across the table. She glared at Theon as he leaned over both the table and Robb to grab a roll from a basket.

“No,” Jon shook his head and then amended quickly, “not that I’m aware of. He hasn’t said anything.”

“You aren’t still thinking about joining the Nights Watch, are you?” Robb asked softly, scowl still firmly in place.

“Good place for a bastard,” Theon put in only to have his next words cut off when Robb turned to glare at him.

“Theon.”

“What?” Theon shrugged. “He won’t be able to stay here forever. Might be the best place for him.”

“Of course he can stay here!” Arya protested only to be cut off by Robb.

“You’ll always have a place at Winterfell, especially once I’m Lord, Jon.”

Jon smiled at his brother. “I know. And no. I’m not considering joining the Watch anymore.” He pushed his plate back and stood, the feet of his chair scraping against the stone floor. “At least not for a long while.”

The stew he’d managed to eat was a cold lump in his stomach. Any appetite he had previously was gone now and he didn’t want to be a part of this conversation anymore.

“I should go. Father is expecting me,” Jon said softly and Robb nodded.
Theon was speaking again, something about a serving girl, and Sansa squeaked out a horrified reply but their words didn’t register with him. Jon passed Arya and Bran on the way to the door and smiled at them, reaching out to ruffle Bran’s hair gently.

The younger boy leaned back and smiled at him. “What are you going to name your wolf, Jon?” he asked before Jon moved off.

Jon paused, chewing on his lip, thinking of the pure white ball of fur squirming amongst his siblings.

“Ghost. His name is Ghost.”

His father’s solar door was shut when he reached it and Jon stopped to stare at it for several long moments. There were so many potential positive changes that could be made on this path, but equally so many possible mistakes that could lead to nothing left in the world but a frozen wasteland.

He took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and knocked.

A moment later the door opened and his father was ushering him inside. The room was warm, a fire crackled and popped a new log having recently been added to the flames. In front of the hearth, two chairs sat, a small chest on the floor between them, positioned so the lid would open away from the fire and allow both people to see its contents easily.

Ned bid him to sit and took the opposite chair for himself.

Jon stared at the chest as he settled, brow furrowed. It was very simple, perhaps a single coat of stain on the wood, but a complicated locking mechanism to keep it shut. The lock was undone now, though, ready to allow the lid to be opened.

“You haven’t seen this before.”

Jon shook his head. “No, I haven’t.” He’d lived hundreds of lives; very few surprises still existed for him. Or so he had thought.

“Wylla, your wet nurse,” Jon looked up to his father who was running a hand over the chest, “insisted that the contents of this were to go with us and be given to you when the time was right. Everything else at the tower we burned to keep the knowledge of what happened there secret. To keep you safe.”

Jon stared at it, trying to slow the storm of thoughts incoherently warring in his mind. A warm hand settled onto his shoulder, causing him to lift his gaze up to meet his father's.

After a moment Ned sat up straighter and drew his hand back. “Perhaps we should start with the words you promised?” he sighed and smiled sadly. “The chest will still be here after. I wish to hear about these lives you’ve lived.”

“It’s a long story,” Jon warned, sitting back, “long and full of death, misery, and chaos. I’ve lived dozens, hundreds of lives until my last death in each. I have tried dozens of paths to completion, changing the details to try and get them right.” He pursed his lips and paused. “Few happy endings exist.” I’ve lost hope of finding one for myself.
“Perhaps a second pair of eyes could make a difference,” Ned said voice low. “Sometimes others can see what we have missed.”

“There are things, deaths, events, and knowledge I have that you will not like, but will be unable to unhear.”

“I would hear as much as you can share. If only to ease your burden.”

Jon eyed him for several minutes before nodding and turning his gaze to the flames dancing in the fireplace. There were so many places he could start, but after a moment he settled on the beginning.

“Except for my first life, it always starts at Ghosts birth. Most often I’m around five and ten or six and ten. Sometimes older. During my first life, I was almost seven and ten. We always find the pups within a day or two and like every life until this one,” he paused and turned back to his father, “the mother direwolf has always died.”

“By a boar?”

“No,” Jon answered, solemnly. The room seemed to chill. “By a stag.”

The tale of his first life was the hardest to tell, as he would come to know over the next months. It was a trial for him to keep on track sometimes, some memories blurring together from other, similar lives causing him to have to backtrack a bit. Ned let him speak, trailing on and rambling all the details that he knew of his own part of the world and what happened to others—family, enemies, big events in the world. He spoke for hours, pausing to take a sip of water and later, at a particularly rough spot, some spiced wine his father retrieved from his desk. They had needed it to get through the events of the red wedding as Jon knew them, among other things.

The mention of white walkers had led to the longest delay in the story as his father had stopped to confirm and then question him about every single detail he could remember of the Others once he spoke of the battle of Hardhome. He had to delve across dozens of lives for the information, even his last.

Jon was thankful then for the one life he had spent training to be a Maester—even though he had hated himself in the end. During that life, the North had been overrun by the time the rest of Westeros had come to realize the true threat, too caught up in fighting over a hunk of melted swords and the illusion of power, and he’d thrown himself from the highest spot he could find to end his life and start again.

It was one of the three times he’d committed suicide.

Pausing to take a sip of lukewarm water, tasting of herbs, Jon watched as his father ran a hand over his face as Jon reached the point of his first death where he’d been betrayed by his own brothers of the Nights Watch.

“And then I woke up, over a day later after the Red Priestess asked her God to bring me back.”

Ned started then. “I thought when you died you awoke at the beginning?”

A sardonic grin wound itself across his face as he stared at the glass of water in his hands, trying to
make out his own features in the dim light. “Only when the Gods allowed. Sometimes they deem my life not over yet and so I continue. I continue until a second death, a few times until a third or fourth if one of the priests got too close to me.

“How often did that happen?”

“A second death? A quarter of the time. I tried to avoid the Red God’s followers as often as I could. It was hard to avoid them if I went to the Wall, sometimes in the Riverlands, and they are all over Essos.”

Falling silent Ned took another gulp of wine and Jon took it as leave to continue. When he was done with his tale, about to speak of his next resurrection, a servant knocked on the door.

Jon fell silent as his father stood and answered. It was Lady Catelyn’s handmaiden, inquiring as to where he was and how long he would be on her behalf. Listening with half an ear Jon let his attention turn back to the small chest between the chairs. Setting aside his glass he reached out and ran a hand over the smooth wood.

“We’ll continue tomorrow, Jon.” Ned startled him, standing behind his shoulder.

“Can I…” Jon’s fingers pressed against the pale wood.

“You may,” his father said and Jon blinked as a key, dangling on a chain, fell into his line of sight. Looking over his shoulder, eyes wide, he stared at Ned who smiled sadly at him.

“This is yours, just like the contents. I trust I do not have to tell you not to remove the chest from this room quite yet, do I?”

“No,” Jon shook his head. Sharing a room with his brother, surrounded by his other siblings and near the nursery didn’t allow for much privacy. The door didn’t even have a lock of any sort. Slowly, he took the chain and key, staring at it for a long moment.

A hand settled on his shoulder. “I’m going to arrange private rooms for you and Robb. Cat has been requesting it for some time now and as you two are growing quickly I believe now would be an opportune time.”

Jon looked up as his fingers grasped the key tightly. There were many questions bubbling through his mind but was unable to settle on one. He didn’t need to.

“You may look like just a boy, Jon, but that is not all that you are.” Ned ruffled his hair gently before squeezing his shoulder again.

Perhaps his father had seen the war that was waging within Jon, between the boy of this life and the grown-men of his memories. This life was the hardest yet, perhaps it had something to do with how young his body was, but reconciling everything was more difficult.

Jon nodded once and dropped his gaze to the chest as he slipped the chain over his neck. He felt his father move to leave and frowned.

“Father?” he started. His father’s steps stopped near the door.

“You should think about telling her,” he said, leaning and slowly opening the lid of the chest. The hinges creaked with disuse. “She almost always dies still believing there was a woman out there that you loved enough to betray your honor and betray her. She dies believing you dishonored her
He looked back over his shoulder, staring at his father’s back. “Family. Duty. Honor,” Jon continued. “You’re her family and I’m yours.”

“I have lied to her for twelve years,” Ned’s voice was barely a whisper.

“You cannot be forgiven without telling the truth.”

“Lock the chest when you leave,” Lord Stark said, emotion drained from his voice. “I’ll show you how to unlock it fully tomorrow.” His hand landed on the doorknob.

“Where did you keep it?” Jon couldn’t help but ask quickly. If he died before tomorrow, he would not do so without the answer. He couldn’t bear not to find this chest again.

“In her crypt.”
Jon let his eyes fall shut as Arya’s arms wrapped around him and he hugged her back, tightly yet carefully. He was still healing from the wounds he’d received in the recent battle against the Karstarks. They’d won and Karhold was now under the North’s control again—his control as King of the North—and Lady Alys Karstark now held power there rather than her cousins. On the road back to Winterfell, he hadn’t expected to run into a small group of previously lost Northerners, including his little sister.

Some of the Lords—and Lady’s—had been known to be alive, held captive in the south under the Frey’s control. Other faces had been complete surprises.

Especially Lady Catelyn.

He could feel her cold eyes on him, unchanged or perhaps harsher than they had been in his youth. She knew he had been declared King, that much was clear in the few words that had been shared between the groups upon their initial meeting.

She also didn’t like it.

In her eyes, he’d done what all Bastards are born wanting to do. He’d taken the birthright of his trueborn siblings and made it his.

The door shut with a sharp clack and Jon faced forward again, staring at a worn, rough brown cloth. His hand shook as he pulled it out of the chest, dropping it aside as it revealed the contents beneath it. Sliding off the chair his knees hit the floor and he pressed both hands against soft, embroidered black cloth. Carefully he pulled it out and after a minute of confusion, he finally realized what it was.

A marriage cloak.

His vision blurred and he wiped at his eyes with his left forearm. Biting his cheek and staring at the stylized three-headed dragon, beautifully intricate, he barely choked back a sob. Nearly every centimeter of the fabric was embroidered and while Jon couldn’t claim to know much about fabric or womanly arts, he’d spent enough time with Sansa and Daenerys—among others—to know that the quality of this cloak was exquisite.

Fit for a princess.

“Next time I see you—you’ll be all in black,” Robb said, grinning.

“It was always my color,” Jon responded, forcing a smile.

“Let me give you some advice bastard. Never forget what you are. The rest of the world will not.
This time he couldn’t hold back the sob and then his eyes blurred and he couldn’t contain the next either. He pulled the cloak fully out of the cloak and onto his knees, clenching his fingers deep into the fabric as tears filled his vision.

Had this always been the truth?

In every life?

Aegon had pondered on it a few times, most often when they were drunk. What if Rhaegar had taken Lyanna as a second wife as the Targaryen’s of old had? But there had never been anyone alive that could confirm it. The Maester’s in Oldtown had no record of it—or it had been destroyed—Howland Reed never knew, and Wylla had never spoken of it or had died before she could.

Sometime later he managed to gather control of himself, calming his sobs and the hiccups that had developed, fingers smoothing the wrinkles out of the fabric. He folded the marriage cloak as well as he could and set it aside gently, on top of the brown fabric that had hidden it.

There were other items in the chest, clumped together, most wrapped in cloth, some thicker than others. There was a very thick bed of cloth at the very bottom. Close to him was a leather-bound sheath of papers which he set aside, not wanting to delve into that mystery quite yet. Letters would take hours to read and it was already very late. As he peaked beneath each cloth, eyeing various treasures, he dislodged a long item, rolled in cloth that had leaned against the longest side of the chest.

Unwrapping it his eyes widened. It was a dagger, beautiful in design—both the hilt and the sheath—silver and gold intertwined in embellishments sparkling with rubies and sapphires. The guard had been designed to mimic roses, winter roses and red roses intertwined, and the pommel was a red-eyed dragon with its back to a blue-eyed wolf.

Carefully unsheathing it, Jon couldn’t help but smile at the beautiful shine of Valyrian steel. He ran his fingers over the cool metal, admiring the craftsmanship before sheathing it and placing it aside as well.

Eyes roving over the other items, something drew him to the center of the chest, the bundle of fabric that was well packed, all the other items carefully placed around it. Adjusting himself, he carefully used both hands to reveal what was hidden, pulling away layers of fabric.

His breath caught in his throat once he had and he swallowed thickly.

_Gods._

Shaking, his fingers gently caressed the rough, textured surface and then curled around it, grasping firmly to remove it from its hiding place.

It was pale, silver-white with a blue sheen that sparkled from pale as a clear summer sky to dark as midnight in a few places. He couldn’t take his eyes off it as something clicked within him, feeling right and whole.

Jon had always managed a connection with whichever dragon he rode in the lives he lived. Usually,
he sat astride Rhaegal, sometimes Viserion, but it had never been like his connection with Ghost. It always seemed like trying to ride an unbroken stallion who had grown up in a wild herd with no human contact at all. This feeling was deeper, like what he felt from Ghost when they were far apart.

He pulled the egg to himself, cradling it. If only he didn’t have to return it to the chest for the time being. Jon knew it wasn’t quite ready to hatch deep down, but he also knew it wouldn’t be long.

Gods be good! How would he—they—hide a dragon?

It was only a few hours, maybe less, until sunrise when he managed to pry himself away from the treasure trove his parents had left him—and the dragon egg—and go to bed. He slept in the next morning, waking only after Robb returned from breakfast with a roll and a sausage wrapped in a cloth for him.

He thanked his brother, bleary-eyed and wanting very little else but to just roll back over, pull his furs over his head, and go back to bed. His body also ached still from the training he’d been sneaking off for in the Godswood and the training he was getting knocked into him by Ser Rodrik.

Instead, he dutifully sat up and ate as Robb watched him from his side of the room. When he was nearly done, a few bites of roll remaining and licking sausage grease from his fingers, Robb broke the silence.

“What did you and father speak of yesterday?” he asked getting up to search through the mess of items they shared. “You were gone most of the night. I tried to stay up and wait for you, but I fell asleep at some point.”

“Sorry,” Jon mumbled, remembering how he’d come in to find Robb sitting up in bed, back against the wall, sound asleep. His brother didn’t seem to remember how he’d helped him find a more comfortable position before falling into his own bed.

“It had to be important,” Robb said, tossing Jon a tunic as he finished off the roll.

Jon nodded, biting his lip as he stood and began to dress. “I—I don’t know if I can speak of it, yet,” he said, smiling tightly. He glanced up at Robb through his long curls, messy from sleep. “I want to tell you, but Father . . . I need to ask permission.”

Frowning Robb stared at him for a moment before realization dawned and his jaw dropped a little. “Did he finally speak of your mother?”

Unable to contain it, Jon nodded his affirmation, a small grin lifting his lips.

Robb smiled back, full and bright. “He told you her name and everything?”

“Yes,” Jon said and then paused, eyes dropping to stare at his tunic as he tied it. “He hasn’t told anyone else, though. Not yet.”

“Mother.” Robb breathed after a momentary pause, his smile disappearing along with the excitement from his voice.

“I told him he should tell her,” Jon said looking up at Robb. “I don’t think it will be right for me to
They were silent for a while as Jon dressed, Robb poking at various items on his side of the room. As Jon pulled on his boots, he finally spoke again.

“Is there anything you can tell me?”

Jon looked up, eyes solemn as he took in his brother’s nervous form. Robb had always tried to be supportive, to understand and be there for him, especially when they were children. He had been the one to comfort Jon when they learnt what ‘bastard’ meant. They’d been educated on the subject by Theon, of all people, but much of their life they had been inseparable—as close as twins.

“She’s dead.”

Robb was to him in seconds, arms wrapping around him and pulling him close. Jon’s fingers clenched in the back of his brother’s tunic and he gasped, eyes squeezing shut.

“I am sorry, Jon.”

He’d been the only one Jon had ever shared his dream of meeting his mother with.

“He’s my brother,” Robb ground out, standing before his mother. They were in his tent, camped a short distance from Riverrun.

Lady Catelyn stood tall, expression tight and unwavering. “I have suffered his very existence for nearly nineteen years. I have allowed him to live in my home because it was his father’s home. But he is not my son and I will not have him disgracing me in my childhood home.”

“Jon never disgraced you, Mother,” Robb responded, his voice taught with emotion, but he kept his volume low. “Father may have, but Jon has never done anything to dishonor our family. He has loved your children and protected us. He has saved my life multiple times on the battlefield.”

“I will not change my mind.” She turned sharply, moving to the front of the tent before pausing. “He can stay with the men or go to another camp. But he is not welcome inside Riverrun.”

Jon’s fingers clenched in Grey Wind’s fur where he was sitting next to the wolf. His brother’s wolf turned and bumped his head against his fingers, tongue brushing out to kiss his skin in an attempt at comfort. Ghost pressed tighter against his other side.

“She has no—” Robb hissed after she had gone, turning to face Jon.

“It’s all right,” Jon interrupted him, trying to smile. “I will be fine here or I can go help Lord—”

“I don’t want you to go anywhere,” Robb dropped beside him, hands clenched as he settled next to Grey Wind. “You’re my brother—you belong at my side.”

Jon had smiled and acquiesced to staying in the camp. He had never entered Riverrun in that life, had never managed to arrange for the truth to come out in a manner that others would believe so Lady Catelyn had never known that he was her nephew and not a stain on her husband’s honor.

He and Robb had died together in that life, side by side, during the battle for Kings Landing. Perhaps it was wildfire that had killed him or just the crush of stone upon him. Jon would never
know for sure.

He wasn’t fireproof in every life, after all.
Dinner was, in general, a family affair—plus Theon—with the exception being feast days. Today was no exception, everyone including Rickon was present for the meal; the babe being passed between his mother, father, and elder siblings as they ate.

Jon, though a bastard in the eyes of the world, had always eaten with his family during the evenings except on the occasions his father was visiting his bannermen. When that happened, he had always attempted to eat in the kitchens or his rooms to avoid Lady Stark’s gaze.

Halfway through dinner, after handing a squirming Rickon over to Sansa, Lady Stark easily garnered the attention of the room with just a few pointed words. Even the babe stared at her, blue eyes wide as he gummed a piece of carrot.

“It has been decided that at two and ten Robb and Jon are old enough to move out of the nursery rooms and into their own quarters.”

“What?” Robb couldn’t help but ask, voice cracking on the end of the word, only to snap his jaw shut as his mother turned her eyes to him.

She lifted one eyebrow at him and paused for a long moment before continuing. “You will both be moving into your own rooms,” She turned her attention to Jon then. He had to fight the instinct to drop his eyes to his plate. “in the main section of the family wing. Robb, of course, will take residence in the traditional quarters of the heir. Jon—Jon will take the room across the hall from him.” Jon’s eyes widened and his chin dropped a little before he shut it. “I expect that you both will take care of your own quarters and not abuse the trust we are affording you.”

Jon nodded, hands shaking in his lap a little. He glanced at his father and then back at Lady Stark as his brother spoke his appreciation. Jon turned the last few moments over, sorting through the words in his mind.

Had his father…

There was a moment of silence and Jon was jolted out of his thoughts by an elbow to his side.

“Th-Thank you, Lady Stark,” Jon said, voice rough, meeting her eyes fully.

She smiled tightly at him and nodded, before reaching over to pick up her youngest son as he smashed the remains of half-boiled carrot into his sister’s hair. The protesting squeals of both children interrupted the moment and prevented Sansa from dwelling on the fact that she didn’t get to move out of the room she shared with Arya yet.

That night, Robb and he spent several long hours when they were supposed to be sleeping huddled together beneath the covers of Robb’s bed talking. Robb spent much of the time babbling his excitement, but on occasion, his nerves showed through. It was then that Jon would remind him that he’d be right across the hall and that they were still brothers and still best friends.

Even Jon was sad to see the change, he remembered the past twelve years of this life, but also the memories of years without Robb close at hand. He wasn’t sure that he wanted to let go of this part of his life go.

He lay there for hours, unable to drift off to sleep, listening to Robb’s gentle snores. His mind was still whirling with the thought that never before had he been given a room in the family wing—not
the true family wing—with all the privileges and amenities thereof.

Lady Stark knew. She had to; it was the only reason Jon could discern that made sense.

She had smiled at him.

Often Jon found himself wishing his memories of Winterfell as a child from his first life were clearer for him, but time and hundreds of years living as an adult had worn them down to faint pictures and remembered events and feelings. This life was much clearer, memories of details and words that had been said to him readily available to him.

It made him sad on the occasion he stopped to ponder it. While he remembered growing up with his siblings here, he had lost much of his original siblings. Like in all lives, though, he tried to ignore the differentiation. This was his life, the people here were his family. Jon hated to think on how it would become easier as days, weeks, and months passed.

He tried not to dwell on such things anymore.

Now though, he wondered if there were any differences between his two childhoods that had led to the early birth of Ghost. If he knew, perhaps it would provide some insight on the events to come. For it was obvious to him now that this life was going to be far, far different from any he’d lived before.

Jon hoped and prayed that it would be every day.

Since revealing himself to his father, they’d met nearly every night, going over the events of life after life—death after death. Most often they spent the time in his father’s solar but occasionally went elsewhere.

Each life was difficult to speak of, in its own way, but there were a few Jon had skipped over, such as his second life. It wasn’t an important one, he’d thought it all just a dream that first time. His death there had been a stupid one. Stupid, but oh so satisfying.

Jon stared at the boy in front of him in the training ring, smirking and belligerently insisting on the use of live steel to the dismay of most onlookers. He had known that his father’s men had already sent for the Maester, believing that Jon would end up injured in order to avoid insulting the royal family.

He never should have responded to the Prince’s taunts, but he couldn’t help but dwell on the fact that the boy had ordered his father’s death and tortured and belittled Sansa for years. His anger had gotten the better of him.

The Prince was a braggart and, while trained, was far from good with the sword. Jon let the boy believe he had the upper hand before taking the step he’d wanted to since the royal party arrived.

It was laughably easy to disarm the boy and shove his sword the royal bastard’s neck.
It was the last thing he saw as the next moment a sword was shoved through his back by the Hound.

Jon couldn’t help but hope they may be able to avoid the mad, incestuous bastard and the dark fate he’d helped to bring down on the Stark family.

It had been his father who had pointed out one crucial point during a late-night spent with the direwolves.

“You mentioned before that in every life the wolf mother was killed by a Stag,” Ned said, running fingers through the dark grey fur behind her ears. She leaned into the touch, eyes sliding half shut.

They were in the kennel, the fast-growing pups roughhousing, napping, and nursing around them. The mother wolf was nearly healed now as well.

Jon nodded as he smiled down at the pups in front of him. Ghost and Lady were on the other end of a thick rag someone had procured for a toy, tugging away as he held it. “That’s right. A few times she was still breathing, once you gave her mercy.”

“Perhaps her life here is as much of an omen as her death was in those lives.”

It was a beautiful thought and Jon smiled brighter at it. He wanted it to be true more than anything.

Sighing at the memory, Jon pressed the door to his new room open with his shoulder and smiled at the sight of the space. He did feel a slight tinge of guilt, knowing that in most lives this had been Bran’s room eventually. Crossing the room, he dumped his armful of clothes onto the bed. It wasn’t the first, a few armfuls had already been placed away carefully. He was surprised at the amount of clothing he had, years into adulthood he could have counted his articles of clothing on two hands—not including his armor—more oft than not.

This room was twice as large as his usual, the fireplace off to the side so that it wasn’t visible from the door, with the window overlooking the courtyard. The window was open, letting in light and a slight breeze which offset the warmth of the fire Jon had started earlier.

The furniture was likely the same as it had been before, except for his chest settled next to the bed. He couldn’t help but grin at the sight of all his belongings in this room. As a child, he’d had more than he thought. Still, it wasn’t much, and his newest set of personal belongings were, for the most part, still hidden away behind a lock.

Displaying everything he had received from his birth parents wasn’t an option, even within the family wing where only the most loyal servants were allowed—most of whom had sworn specific oaths to the godswood. Displaying a Targaryen marriage cloak, Rhaegar’s harp, even the dagger would be too dangerous, especially with curious younger siblings at an age where secrets were hard to keep.

His clothes were quickly sorted into their places, and he grinned old memories of doing the same in other locations. The last time he had near this much clothing was when he met Daenerys in Meereen or the last time he was King in the North.

The last thought left him shuddering, that was a title he did not want to bear in this life.
Rocking back on his heels he breathed deep, the scent of the wood in the fireplace and the summer air filled him with comfort. Something stirred within him, deep, and his eyes flitted to the side, towards the chest his father had carried in for him earlier, smiling and ruffling Jon’s hair at his embarrassment when he’d gone to his father for help. While not large, the chest was big enough to be unwieldy and heavy for his two and ten-year-old frame.

It was set next to the bed, close enough for Jon to reach out and touch when his head laid on his pillow if he lay close to the edge. He’d lain a small cloth over the top, bright blue and edged with embroidered detail. Jon had been surprised to find the cloth, a present that Sansa had gifted him a year or so after she first started practicing the art for his name day, not long before she learned what ‘bastard’ meant.

The stitches were careful, but messy depictions of various things in an early attempt to design scenery. Wolves dancing through a field of flowers. Kneeling next to the chest, Jon smiled as he ran a finger over one of the wolves. He could see small pinprick holes where stitches had been undone, corrected to form a more satisfactory version of the Stark house animal. Picking it up he set it upon his bed carefully, smiling as he did so.

He unwound the chain from around his neck that held the key. The key was only part of the lock, the chest itself held hidden mechanisms reminiscent of a puzzle box that reset when locked.

Once he paused and glanced over his shoulder, making sure the door was locked and barred. Seeing that it was Jon reached into the chest and moved the folded marriage cloak aside, adjusted the wrapping around the harp, and then carefully using both hands he pulled the dragon egg from its wrappings.

He shivered at the sensation of the warm, hard, scaled shell against his hand and then winced as he cut a finger on one, particularly sharp detail. Standing Jon made his way to the fireplace, driven by the tugging in his mind and memories of how his Aunt birthed her dragons.

It had been a bit awkward, telling his father about the egg—convincing him that it wasn’t a fossil or decorated stone but that a viable baby dragon was sleeping within the hard shell, nearly ready to awaken. Lord Stark had thought on it for several days before, just yesterday, telling Jon not to prevent the dragon’s birth.

Jon had to grin at the memory his father solemnly advising him that: “A loyal dragon would be a boon when the long night came”.

He’d promised in return, “They will be.”

While Jon wasn’t entirely sure what would be required or how long it would take, he had no doubt it would be nowhere near as much as what his Daenerys did to birth her dragons. She had used fire and blood, sacrificed lives to bring them to life, but she had hatched three dragons—only one of which truly bonded to her in the way he’d bonded to Ghost.

A theory had been developing in his mind recently, knowing that Rhaegar had to have given him the egg, presented it to his mother before he was even born. If he’d been gifted one than perhaps Aegon and Rhaenys had as well. If so than the dim bond Aegon and he had managed with the dragon’s they’d paired with made more sense—it’d been warring with pre-existing bonds.

He smoothed a finger over a shiny white scale as he settled in front of the hearth. He gently set the egg down and then, being careful not to smear blood on his shirt, he rolled his sleeves up, eyes drifting up to the crackling fire.
Jon gently picked the egg back up and held it out into the flames before settling it into the middle, a spot he’d carefully designed to make a nest of fire for the egg. Flames licked at his fingers and arms in gentle, warm kisses. In this life, he was at least highly fire-resistant. Drawing back he smiled and the wave of what he could only describe as contentment that swirled through him.

It was completely opposite of the giddy excitement that was coming from Ghost.

He blinked as a loud knock sounded at his door.

“Jon?” Arya asked, jiggling the knob.

“One minute,” he called and glanced around as he carefully pulled his shirt sleeves down his arms. Crossing to the bed he quickly shut the chest and the moved back to unbar the door. As he walked, he stuck his cut finger into his mouth for a moment, luckily it had nearly finished bleeding.

“Jon!” Arya wined impatient, just before he reached it.

“Ayra,” Jon mimicked her as he opened it and feigned hurt when she slapped his arm. He grinned at her, smile wide as she tried to look around him. He raised an eyebrow, “Arya?”

Her eyes shot back up to his and she blinked. “Oh!” She started, excitement filling her eyes. “Father says we can spend some time with the pups right now and soon they may be able to come inside with us! They are wee-weaning them!” She grabbed his hand and turned, tugging to lead him out of the room. “We only have until dinner!”

“Whoa!” Jon laughed, grabbing her shoulder with his other hand to stop her. “Give me a moment, please, Arya.” He pulled away and headed back into his room.

Huffing out a sigh and crossing her arms, Arya watched as he locked the chest and placed the key around his neck again.

“What’s that?”

“That,” Jon said as he reached her, smiling, “is private.”

“Robb doesn’t have a chest that locks in his room,” she frowns, glancing around him at it.

“Perhaps not yet,” Jon chewed his lip, “but then his heirlooms are still father’s for the most part.”

Her eyes widened, “Your mother?”

He nodded watching as she bit her lip, curiosity bubbling up in her grey eyes. “I will show you,” he said before she could drum up the courage to ask. “One day. But not yet,” he paused watching her lips twist into a pout. “Promise me you won’t try and open it or ask anyone else to.”

The pout deepened and she wrinkled her nose.

“Promise me, please.”

“Fine, I promise,” she grumbled, crossing her arms.

“Do I have to drag you in front of the Heart Tree?”

“No!” Arya scowled up at him. “I said I promise!”

“All right, all right,” Jon held up his hands. “Now, you said something about the pups?”
Her eyes lit up again and she grabbed his hand again, dragging him from the room. “Hurry! We only have a couple of hours!”

Jon smiled as he let her pull him along, ignoring the frowns, looks, and exclamations of several servants and guards as they ran through the corridors.
“Jon,” Sansa murmured, coming to stand next to him.

The wind was blowing cold, the air chilled enough to freeze moisture on his beard. They were staring out across fields towards where the woods used to stand in the distance. Much of it had been cleared in the last year, felled to make room for the tent city, for buildings to be built, and for walls and a moat to be dug. Winterfell had turned into a refuge for the north as many of the holdings had. A place where civilians toiled to support the armies that worked to defend them and find the White Walkers amid the hordes of dead.

He turned his gaze to her, watching the green glow of the wildfire in the distance from the moats the alchemists manned dance shadows across her face.

She smiled at him softly, a small quirk of her lips as her shoulder brushed against his. “We received a letter from White Harbor.”

“When am I expected?”

“They wish to leave in two day’s time.” Sansa frowned, eyes trailing over their people. “Is Rhaegal well enough?”

“Aye,” Jon nodded, remembering how his dragon had been pierced in the side during the battle at Last Hearth a month previously. They’d saved the keep but half the civilians camped in the surroundings had perished when a wildfire moat had failed, dissipating without an alchemist tending it. “What supplies are they bringing?”

“Grain from the Reach.” Sansa crossed her arms, shivering. “Soldiers from Essos and more from Dorne. Seeds rumored to grow well in colder climates and more glass.”

“Do we have enough room?” Jon frowned, eyeing the area.

“We’ve cleared some more fields, using the limited daylight to dig out more trenches to the east.”

“You’ve done well,” Jon met her eyes. “Your father and mother would be proud.”

“We’ve done well,” she corrected him, lifting her chin. “You’re the one fighting, I’m just—”

“Keeping the people fed and giving them hope. A true Queen.”

“I wouldn’t be anywhere without you, my King.”

Ghost ran from where he’d been following at Jon’s heels suddenly, speeding across the courtyard as fast as his small legs could take him. Looking up, he stared after the pup before following at a quick pace.

“Sit!” A squealed exclamation met his ears even before he located his companion. The direwolf pup promptly plopped his rear down at the command, tail swinging in the dirt, full attention on the surprised redhead in front of him.
Sansa had an incredulous look on her face as she stared down at Ghost; Lady obediently sat at her heels, staring up at her as well. A second later a smile lit up her face and she knelt, tearing a piece of meat out of the cloth she held and then splitting it in two to share between the two pups. Ghost took it and stepped back a pace, chewing on the treat. Reaching out, Sansa ran a hand over his small head and scratched gently behind his ears.

Jon came to a stop a few feet behind Ghost, smiling a little at the scene before him. Sansa wasn’t quite as cold to him yet as she had gotten as she aged. She was still generally standoffish, following in her mother’s footsteps and referred to him as ‘half-brother’ at best, but she wasn’t yet at the age where they need to be a lady and only associate with those deemed appropriate for her status had become her obsession.

“Have you been training him, too?” Sansa looked up at him, blue eyes sparkling.

As soon as they’d been given leave to spend time with the direwolf pups away from their mother, Sansa had been working with little Lady to give her the best manners an animal could develop. Jon hadn’t needed to work with Ghost, they had a bond developed over many lives. He was more concerned over making sure the pup grew up hale and strong at his side.

“A little,” he said unable to explain the truth and knelt to greet Lady when she sidled up and placed a paw on his shin, begging for attention. They were bigger than normal puppies would be at this age and twice as rambunctious, even little Lady for all her charm and overall calm demeanor.

“You would think he would be scary,” Sansa mused, giggling a little as Ghost tried to balance on his hind legs to kiss her nose only to fall backward. “With his red eyes, I mean.”

“He’s just a pup,” Jon ran a hand over Ghost’s back as he returned to Jon, embarrassed, “like Lady.”

Sansa nodded as she tore a piece of meat off and held it out to Jon to take and then tore off another piece. She managed to coax Ghost back over to her, smiling when he lathed her fingers with happy kisses after. Jon held the one in his hand out to Lady who took the treat happily.

“Does he have any trouble seeing?”

He shook his head. “Not that I can tell. Perhaps, but he gets by just fine so far.”

“Good,” she said and then looked up at Jon. “Arya says father spoke to you about—about your mother.”

Glancing up at her, he paused at her curious expression trying to decide how to handle this. “He did.”

“Mother doesn’t seem to dislike you as much as before.” Sansa bit her lip and dropped her gaze to Ghost again. “I think she is upset with father, though.”

Reaching out, Jon tugged gently at Ghost's short tail. The pup whirled, yipping and darting over to Jon’s lap, trying to catch his fingers as Lady jumped after her brother.

“I think they fought about it.”

“Will you tell me?” Sansa asked quietly a few minutes later, picking blades of grass apart as the pups had started to roll around together, playing in the patch of grass between them.
“Yes,” Jon decided then, “when I tell Arya.”

She smiled at him, opening her mouth to speak but was interrupted by a commotion far across the courtyard. They turned to look, both frowning when they saw a good-sized group of riders enter the castle yard, mostly men but there were a few women as well. Jon recognized some of the house sigils on display, mostly small vassal houses and then he caught sight of Lord Manderly, much younger than he could remember seeing him before.

“I didn’t know we were having visitors!” Sansa stood quickly and Jon followed suit. “Who do you think they are?” She asked him, brushing grass off her dress, an embarrassed blush rising high on her cheeks.

“Lord Manderly,” Jon told her quietly, wondering if they should head over to the group. Ghost and Lady had paused their play and were staring across the yard as the men dismounted and unprepared stable boys and servants went to assist. “And some of his vassals it looks like.”

“I wonder why they would come unannounced?”

A few minutes passed and their father and Lady Stark rushed to greet the visitors, speaking with them for a few minutes before the new arrivals were ushered into the keep, led by Lord Stark.

“I wonder why they are here.” Sansa wrung her hands, brow furrowed.

“I don’t know,” Jon murmured glancing down at Ghost. He didn’t know, but he could make some educated guesses.

Over the last few weeks, during his discussions with father, coastal defenses and trade had been much-discussed topics. While they hadn’t dominated any discussions, they had been brought up nearly every night.

Lack of a strong Northern fleet had been one issue that plagued many of the lives he’d lived, allowing for issues with the Ironborn and often reliance on neighbors for assistance when the Long Night came. If Lord Stark was increasing the North’s naval power, it could only be a good thing. Jon hoped it wouldn’t cause issues with the South though.

“Lady Sansa!” The voice of Septa Mordane startled them both, and they turned. Sansa’s expression morphed into horrified realization; she was late for her lessons. “Look at your dress!” The Septa tutted at her and then shot a glare at Jon. “This is highly unbecoming of a lady and not to mention the company you are—”

“Septa Mordane,” Lady Stark’s voice was cool as ice as she interrupted the elder woman. “I believe Sansa is late for her lessons, is she not?”

“Yes,” the Septa straightened her back and nodded, “that is why—”

“Jon,” Lady Stark turned to him, “would you take Lady along with Ghost to the kennel, please?”

He nodded, otherwise still. “Of course, Lady Stark.”

“And when you are done find Robb and clean up. Lord Stark wishes for Robb and you to sit in on his meeting with the Lords in an hour.”

“I will, my lady.”

She pursed her lips and raised an eyebrow at the Septa who barely waited for Sansa to hand an
unhappy Lady to Jon before hurrying her off. Once they had stepped away she glanced him over for a moment before turning herself and heading back to the keep.

Jon looked down at Lady and then to Ghost who stared back up at him with knowing red eyes.
Robb, as it turned out, had heard from some servant or another and was in the midst of scooting Grey Wind into the kennel with his mother and Nymeria—Summer and Rickon’s unnamed pup, Shaggydog, must have been spending time in the nursery—when Jon arrived. The pups weren’t exactly happy at being left behind, but upon seeing his siblings Grey Wind promptly tackled Ghost before licking Lady’s nose.

“Both of us?” Robb asked surprised as they headed to clean up.

“That is what Lady Stark said,” Jon acknowledged, I don’t question your mother clear in the tone of his words. He glanced at his brother out of the corner of his eye, trying to gauge his reaction.

Robb grinned at him then. “I’m glad. I have been trying to convince Father to let you rejoin my lessons for ages.”

“You have?” Jon had never known.

“Of course!” Robb exclaimed, stopping him with a hand on his arm. “I told you before, many times, that when I am Lord of Winterfell I want you at my side to aid me, brother. That is,” he smiled in thought, “if Father doesn’t gift you a hold of your own one day.”

“I doubt he would do that,” Jon said, shaking his head.

“It’s been done before; many families have come into existence as cadet branches from bastard lines,” Robb pointed out. It was true, but Jon knew that had never been his father’s plan for him; although with all the changes he was starting to wonder what new plans were arising.

And he wasn’t a bastard, not truly.

Something must have shown on his face, Jon wasn’t sure what or how exactly Robb interpreted it, but his brother caught him in a hug.

“Doesn’t matter what others may say, you’ll always be welcome here. You are family. My brother.”

Jon pulled back, smiling a little which Robb returned with a bright smile of his own.

“We should hurry,” he said then, nodding down the hall. “Your mother said for us to be there within an hour.”

When they arrived at the room that had been set up for the meeting, a smaller dining room off the great hall, the table was covered in food for the midday meal and the lords and ladies—eight in total—were getting situated. Their father was standing near the head of the table, two unoccupied chairs to the right of him, speaking with Lord Manderly.

Robb and Jon paused a few feet into the room; Jon standing a step behind Robb at his shoulder. It only took a minute for Lord Manderly to notice them.

“Ah!” The Lord of White Harbor grinned widely. “You must be young Lord Robb!” he exclaimed.
Ned looked up, glancing over his shoulder towards them and smiled, before nodding at his bannerman. He motioned them forward, settling a hand on Robb’s shoulder a moment later. “This is my eldest son, and heir, Robb.” He paused and looked at Jon who stepped forward a moment later. “And my son Jon.”

Lord Manderly’s smile barely twitched as he looked between the two boys. “They’ve grown a lot since I last saw them. Just babes you were! You must be running your training master ragged to keep up with such strong boys as you.”

“We try, my lord,” Robb answered, glancing at his father after he spoke.

The other lords greeted them then, mostly focusing on Robb, which was understandable. Jon, as a bastard, was an unusual presence to be had and though allotted respect as Lord Stark’s son was not his heir nor his trueborn son. Northerners were, in general, more lax in treatment of bastards in comparison to most places south of the neck, but that was not to say they were generally raised among the trueborn children such as Jon had been. Usually, they were fostered out after a certain age.

It had upset Lady Stark when Ned had refused to even consider it. Even when Jon had asked at the age of eight if perhaps he could be fostered somewhere; his father had refused and told him never to ask again.

None of the lords said anything, even the one that Jon was sat beside did not let any discomfort he may have show.

As the meal got underway the discussion began and Jon found that his earlier assumptions had been, for the most part, accurate. His father started out the talk by asking each of the men, and women, in the room the status of their ships, business, and projected trade in the coming years—specifically requesting both the best case and worst-case scenarios along with the middling. Lord Stark even brought Robb and Jon into the conversation a few times, requesting they recite numbers or details they had learned in their lessons.

It wasn’t until near an hour into the discussion as the food on the table was near gone and bellies were full that things turned to negotiating possible increases in shipbuilding, farming, trade, and several other subjects including increasing the number of men at arms and training more small folk to form militia should the need arise.

“My lord,” one of the men put in after a while, “I’m not sure it would be feasible or necessary to increase the farmland or number of glass gardens on my land to quite that extent.”

“You have fertile land that is currently unused, do you not?” Ned asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Aye,” he nodded, “but the amount of work put in would not justify the amount of trade the results would sow.”

“Jon,” Lord Stark started after a short pause, his stare having silenced the Lord. Jon looked up at his father. “When was the last winter to go on for more than ten years?”

“Over a thousand years ago, my lord,” Jon answered without hesitation before pausing in thought and then reciting the years and exact length.

“How long was our last winter, Robb?”

Robb glanced at his father and answered just as promptly, providing the date of the beginning and end along with the length. “It was the shortest on record.”
“Aye, for at least three thousand years it was.” Ned nodded and turned his gaze back to the Lords. “This summer is, perhaps, past the halfway point, but as yet the end is not in sight. The last time there was such a short winter, followed by a summer this long it was followed by a winter that lasted a generation.”

Jon shivered, he’d experienced that winter first hand. It had lasted near ten years in every life he’d lived. It had been horrible, even in the lives they’d had support from Essos and other lands. The easier winters were always those when the White Walkers had died quickly—Jon hadn’t experienced many of those.

“You wish for us to plan for a twenty-year winter,” Lord Manderly stated the thoughts of everyone in the room aloud, understanding written on his face.

“My maester confirmed the possibility of my theories after exchanging ravens with some colleagues at the Citadel,” Ned confirmed, face solemn. “I would rather be wrong, but we cannot afford not to prepare if I am right.”

“Excess stores can be traded or given away,” one of the ladies said after a moment. “I would prefer not to have to watch people starve while knowing that it could have been prevented. I will prepare my land and people.”

A chorus of agreement followed her statement, only a couple of the men looking uncomfortable with having to expend the resources requested. Negotiations had been made, however, to help ease the burden, especially in regards to the increase in ships and men-at-arms.

Hours later, Lord Stark excused Robb, Jon, and the vassals, giving them leave to settle into their quarters until the feast that evening. Jon and Robb were the last to leave and as the door shut behind him, Jon couldn’t help but hear Lord Manderly’s grim, concerned voice ask his father a question.

“I understand the ships and farms, my lord, but the increase in men . . . what war do you see us fighting?”

Rivers were different than the sea but no less beautiful. On a river, though, you could see land on both sides, gorgeous scenery and the occasional sight of people. He’d never been on a boat simply to enjoy the scenery before, it surprised Jon about how peaceful it made him.

“It will get old, eventually,” his brother’s voice promised as the blue-haired, older boy sidled up next to him, “but it will always be lovely.”

“I don’t know about that,” Jon turned to look at Aegon, taking in his profile and trying to find the features they shared. His half-brother had taken after their father far more than he had, though they both shared a similar build. Jon looked more Stark than anything, a fact that had kept him safe growing up.

Aegon shrugged. “I guess it may take a while,” he paused and raised an eyebrow. “Found your sea-legs yet, brother?”

Wincing Jon felt his stomach turn a little. He’d been on a boat near half a year now between leaving Westeros and finding Aegon. “As much as Ghost has.” The poor wolf was curled up nearby in a heap, ears flat. At least Ghost wasn’t throwing up anymore. The open ocean and the
river rapids were different enough that it had taken him more time to get used to them as well.

Aegon grinned wider, glancing at the wolf. “At least he can hold his dinner now.”

Ghost’s eyes slit open and he stared, red eyes glaring in their direction. He didn’t move though, unwilling or too ill to get up.

“Aye,” Jon said. “At least there’s that.” He turned back to watch the shoreline, hands gripping the rail, listening as the crew went about their business.

“I’m glad you found me,” Aegon said softly, leaning next to him, bumping their shoulders together. “I know it may not have seemed that way, especially at first—”

“It’s a hard story to believe,” Jon said softly, eyes dropping to watch the waves shifting around the boat. The water was relatively clear and he could see a few large fish traveling near the ship.

“But not out of the realm of possibilities.” Aegon settled his elbows on the railing and leaned over a bit to watch the waves as well. “They say Daenys the Dreamer saw the Doom of Valyria, which led our family to move to Dragonstone and survive the fall. And she is not the only one,” he paused, leaning his cheek on one arm to look over at Jon. “And then your Stark blood . . . the connection you have with Ghost.”

Jon had used the warging ability to help convince them of his ‘seer’ abilities. The abilities he’d claimed had let him to his brother. It was always a risk, Jon Connington was always a wild card in how he would react to Jon and his claims. Thus far in this life the man while not fully trusting him he had accepted him into the crew without too much issue.

“I’m just glad you believed me,” Jon replied honestly, glancing over at his brother. “I don’t know where I would have gone . . . what I would have done if you hadn’t.”

“Would you have gone to our aunt and uncle?” Aegon asked.

Jon shook his head. “I don’t think so. At least . . . I would have waited some time. Viserys—Viserys I believe would kill me . . . and you if he knew of us. He is—He is truly his father’s son.”

“And Daenerys?”

“Daenerys has the potential to be a true Queen,” Jon said after a moment’s thought. “A conqueror and a ruler loved by her people. But we should approach her carefully, I think. But I do believe she craves the love of family deep down.” He paused for a moment before murmuring, “The dragon—”

Aegon smiled, straightening, and meeting Jon’s eyes as he nodded. “The dragon must have three heads.”
There was a feast at Winterfell generally every few moons, sometimes more often, ranging from small family and household gatherings to celebrate name days to larger feasts when hosting Lord Stark’s bannermen. It didn’t take Jon long to get ready, he’d already cleaned up earlier for meeting with Lord Manderly and his vassals, so he took the time to work on some of the lessons Maester Luwin had set for him, sitting in front of the fire in his room.

His mind wandered after a bit, not being able to focus on history he already knew and his gaze drifted to the flames dancing in the hearth. The dragon egg was still nestled securely between burning logs that Jon stoked multiple times a day with new logs, whenever the fire petered out. It surprised him, thusly, when not long before dinner a knock sounded from his door.

“Come in,” Jon called, setting the pile of papers on the floor as he looked towards the door. He was expecting Robb or maybe Arya. He started, eyebrows raising, and stood. “Lady Stark.” His fingers pulled at the edge of his tunic.

“Jon,” she said, eyes taking in the details of his room before nodding satisfied at the state of it. “May I come in? I wish to speak with you for a few minutes.”

“Of course.” He nodded quickly, biting his lip.

She stepped in and closed the door behind before turning to face him fully. For a few long moments, she just watched him silently, looking him over, scrutinizing his face.

Finally, she spoke, “For twelve years I have hated you and what I believed you were representative of.”

Jon’s jaw clenched and his fingers twitched, wanting to follow suit but he forced them to remain open and relaxed.

“I now know that it was all based on a lie.” She stepped closer to him and he dropped his gaze. “I wish I could be sorry for how I treated you, but I cannot be. I did not know the truth of things. Your . . . uncle kept it secret from us both.” He heard her sigh, dress and feet shifting in the otherwise silent room. “So I cannot be sorry as I treated you how I would have treated any bastard child a husband of mine fathered.”

He felt a finger on his chin pushing it up and lifted his gaze to meet Tully-blue eyes—eyes so like Robb and Sansa’s. “If I had known though . . .” She sighed and dropped her hand. “A nephew or niece, trueborn or bastard is different. Things would have been different had I known, at least in private.”

“I’m not a threat to Robb,” Jon murmured, “I never was. It doesn’t matter who my father is.”

A sad smile quirked the edges of Lady Stark’s lips, ever so slightly. “I know,” she said. “I have known that from the moment you first crawled. You were motivated to do so to reach Robb, to comfort him.” She looked away, out the open window. “I just couldn’t . . . I cannot change the past, but I can change what will happen from here on.” Her face tightened, emotion hiding behind a mask. “That being said, no matter what we would like there are some things that cannot be changed at this time.”

“I understand,” Jon said, smiling sadly. He did, behaviors couldn’t change overnight even if they weren’t ingrained. Questions would arise that would have to be explained away to the household,
bannermen, to everyone. “It would be too dangerous for the family.”

“For you,” Lady Stark corrected, “most especially. But yes, for the whole of the family. Your uncle has sacrificed a lot to keep you safe. We will all continue to do so for as long as necessary.”

“Thank you, Lady Stark,” Jon paused for a moment before continuing, unable to hold in his curiosity. His father hadn’t shared his plans with him regarding this. “How will the changes towards—towards me be explained?”

She looked away from him, expression tight and Jon thought he saw a flash of guilt. “Lord Stark and I will handle any questions as they arise. Do not worry yourself.”

He nodded and watched as she turned to go.

“And Jon?” She called softly before opening the door. “While I hope you may one day be able to call me aunt—Lady Catelyn will be fine in private from now on.”

“Uncle Jon!” A squeal of excitement and the pounding of feet brought a smile to his face as he turned from his horse, adjusting his grip on the reins as he did so.

“Uncle Jon!” Rhaego stared up at him, coming to a stop and holding a wooden practice sword in front of him. The boy was perhaps four years old, growing bigger and more active every day. He drove his mother crazy with all the energy he had.

Jon grinned at the boy. They were cousins in truth, but Daenerys has insisted on Rhaego calling Jon ‘uncle’ and that Jon call her ‘sister’ when he must, stating it was entirely too awkward to have a nephew that was older than her.

“I challenge you!” the little boy cried in Dothraki, the tongue of his father.

“Oh dear!” Jon said, holding his free hand up. “I don’t suppose you have a weapon I could borrow, my dear nephew?”

The little boy’s nose scrunched up. “You have a sword, Uncle Jon!”

“Aye,” Jon nodded solemnly, “but my sword is no match for yours. It would hardly be a fair fight. You’d best me in an instant!”

The boy turned, eyeing his nanny who’d followed him over, trying to hide a grin and failing.

“Kirgi! We need another sword!”

That night, after most the feasting was over, when Lady Catelyn bid him and Robb they scooped up their younger siblings—Jon carrying a clinging, bleary-eyed Arya on his back and Robb scooping up Bran before he could nod off into the remains of dinner and dessert on his plate—and headed to bed, Sansa trailing a little put out behind them. She had begun dancing lessons and hoped to take part in celebrations tonight, but the visiting Lords and Ladies had not brought their children or families, traveling light to speak with other Houses. Lord Manderly had stopped at Winterfell on
the way to meet with Houses on the western coast and take stock of the territory for Lord Stark.

Jon caught Robb in the corridor after handing his sister off to her nanny, snagging his elbow before his brother could open the door to his room.

Robb raised a sleepy eyebrow in question.

“I promised to tell you of my mother,” Jon managed to get out after a moment, voice hushed and rough.

Surprise filtered across Robb’s face. “Aye, you did.”

“I would like to do so tonight.”

“Let me get ready for bed,” Robb said, glancing towards his door. “Once you are ready we can meet in my room.”

Jon shook his head. “I have something to show you.”

“All right,” Robb nodded after a moment, “your room then.”

Less than ten minutes later, Robb knocked on his door, opening it seconds later and slipping into the room. He was dressed for bed, feet bare.

“Bar the door, please,” Jon called over his shoulder from where he sat on the floor near the hearth. He glanced over his shoulder, watching to confirm that his brother did so and then crossed the room to sit next to him, eyeing the small chest Jon had dragged over and unlocked earlier.

Jon waited for a moment before clearing his throat. “What I am about to speak of... you cannot tell a soul,” he said quietly, imploring his brother with as much emotion as he could manage. “Not without permission. Only a handful of people know what I am about to tell you. It is a secret that could mean death should it reach the wrong ears.”

Robb frowned, eyes trailing up from where he’d been watching Jon’s fingers play across the wood nervously. “Your mother’s identity is secret truly that dangerous?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “It is...” he wrinkled his nose, trying to come up with the words, “Treasonous.” Jon leaned forward, meeting Robb’s confused gaze. “I need you to promise, Robb,” Jon continued. “I this comes to be known by the wrong person then at the very least mine and most certainly father’s life will be forfeit.”

“I would never do anything to hurt you, brother,” Robb said, freckles standing out against pale skin in the firelight.

“Promise me, please,” Jon grasped his forearm and Robb turned his arm to grasp Jon’s in turn.

“I promise,” Robb said finally, eyes flitting over Jon’s features. “I will not speak of it with anyone that you or father have not given me leave to. I swear it on the Old Gods and the New.”

Jon searched his face and nodded, smiled, and spoke his voice wavering. “I’m not your brother, not by birth.”

“What?” Robb jerked back, surprise and confusion warring on his face.

Jon dropped his gaze, steeling himself, and curled fingers around the lid of the chest before slowly opening it.
“It’s what father told me,” he settled the lid and reached into the chest. “I’m not his son.” Jon pulled aside the brown fabric to reveal the contents of the chest. “My mother was your Aunt Lyanna,” his voice stumbled over the words as he continued, fingers trembling as he picked up the marriage cloak. He unfolded it to reveal the red dragon, stark against a field of black. “My fa—sire was Rhaegar Targaryen.”

Jon stared at the cloak, fingers trailing over the tail of the dragon, giving Robb time to process everything. Robb, just like he, had grown up in the aftermath of the rebellion, listening to the stories told by the victors. The tales of mad Targaryens, a stolen and raped wolf maid, and history of a dynasty being slowly twisted. If the maester’s hadn’t such excellent records, the realm would have been believing that all Targaryen’s from Aegon the Conqueror to Aegon VI, but a babe moons old, had been monsters.

“You—you’re a Targaryen?” Robb asked, reaching out to tentatively touch the edge of the cloak. His eyebrows shot up and he stared at Jon. “You’re the ri—”

“No.” Jon shook his head. “By birth, I would be Jon—Jaehaerys—Targaryen per the letters, anyway.” He moved the edge of the cloak aside to snatch up the leather-bound papers and then looked to Robb, eyes imploring, “But please don’t call me that. I’m Jon. To take the Targaryen name would be a death sentence. Maybe someday, but,” he smiled sadly, “for now I’m a Snow.”

“You may use the name Snow, but you’re a Stark more than a Targaryen,” Robb said after a moment taking the papers from Jon and setting them aside. “They married then?”

“On the Isle of Faces.”


Jon nodded. “Apparently, it was also part of a larger plan to overthrow the Mad King that . . . fell apart on my—on Rhaegar.” There was documentation of the marriage there along with other important documents, including information on the funds set aside with the Iron Bank as a bride price to the Stark’s. That had surprised Jon when he found it and he was still trying to decide how to bring it to his father’s attention.

“So,” Robb said after a few minutes of silence where Jon had slowly uncovered other items from within the chest, “you’re my cousin then.”

“Yes.” Jon bit his lip, glancing up at Robb from behind a tangle of dark curls.

Robb stared at him for a moment before moving, scooting close and grabbing him in a tight hug. Wrapping his arms around Jon’s shoulders he spoke directly into his ear, “It doesn’t matter who your father was or what name you choose to carry. You are my brother. Nothing will ever change that.”

Jon buried his face in his brother’s neck and grasped the back of Robb’s thin nightshirt tightly. Something uncurled within him and his eyes slammed shut around a flood of moisture, trying to keep it at bay, but he couldn’t and he finally let go allowing the tears and pent up emotions to flow as he buried himself into his brother’s arms.

Later, when tears had mostly dried and they’d spent some time marveling over the Valyrian dagger Rhaegar and gifted Lyanna, Jon bit his lip and glanced towards the fire before turning back to Robb, a little nervous but also excited.

“Do you want to see a dragon egg?” he asked and watched as the red head’s eyes lit up and brows
That night Jon fell asleep, his shoulder pressed against Robb’s, listening to the light snores of his brother sleeping as he drifted. He dreamt of flying that night, showing Robb the landscape of the North from the back of a white dragon while in the distance other dragons whirled and swooped across the rising sun.

The first night the direwolf pups were allowed to sleep within the castle was a quiet one. The weather was warm and Jon kept the window open so that the summer breeze could come in to offset the warmth from the glowing fire. He stoked it just after coming up with Ghost, playing a short game of fetch with a piece of kindling, smiling as Ghost retrieved it again and again until finally, worn out, the pup dropped into a pile of furs Jon had set up near the bed.

Jon found he couldn’t sleep that night, not due to the warmth, but due to a maelstrom of thoughts curling through his mind. Nothing concrete just fleeting snatches and tidbits making him restless without any sort of clear cause.

As he laid there, staring at the shadows cast on the wall by the flames flickering in the hearth, something stirred within him and instinctively he sat up, casting his gaze around the room. It took but a moment to focus in on the fire and the dragon egg within. The flames had died down during the past few hours, embers and small flickers shooting up on occasion for mere seconds before calming.

Blinking, he shoved the furs back from his feet and shuffled out of the bed his bare feet slapping lightly against the floor. As he grew closer the feeling intensified and he knelt in front of the hearth, staring into the at the egg.

He barely spared Ghost a glance as the usually silent direwolf whined behind him, paws padding closer until a cold nose brushed against his elbow. Jon reached back and ran a hand over his head, scratching behind his ears before leaning forward. He reached out, into the sputtering flames and gently picked up the dragon egg, holding it into the air, staring at it.

It was twitching, movement evident within the suddenly brittle shell. Before his eyes a tiny indent appeared, pressing outward, cracks spreading. The formerly bright sheen of the egg’s blue on white iridescence seemed dull.

Settling back on his heels, kneeling, Jon settled the egg after a while into his lap. It had cooled enough that it didn’t burn the cloth of the sleeping clothes he’d worn to bed. Carefully, he pulled a piece of shell away where the indent had peaked and smiled as it revealed a tiny nostril, shiny wet and white with dark accents. As he picked another piece away the little dragon bumped its muzzle against his finger and he shivered along with Ghost who was pressed against his side.

Ghost’s presence increased, welcoming, as the dull feeling of another mind sharing their space roared to life. As Jon worked to help free the little creature from its shell, a feeling of completeness unfurled within him, happiness bubbling between the three of them.

Wiggling his entire little body with excitement, Ghost settled his head on the crook of Jon’s elbow to watch moments before the little dragon found its strength and the egg shattered, falling in a rain of debris across Jon’s lap and the floor as it pressed its limbs outwards.
Adjusting his grip, Jon carefully set it onto his lap, watching as it teetered and stumbled, his hands at the ready to steady the newborn if need be. Wings flapped and flopped against him, still slightly damp and it squawked, voice coming out in more of a hiss.

Smiling, Jon helped it right itself and balance on his knee.

It stared up at Jon, meeting his eyes with pale brown-red orbs that he knew would likely darken and change to the red-gold of its cousins. It leaned its neck up and squawked again, this time emitting a tiny sound, pale comparison to the roar Rhaegal called out in Jon’s memories.

“Hello,” Jon said and held his hand out, smile widening further as the little white and blue dragon bumped its head against his fingers. “Sorry, it took so long to meet you.” After a moment, he dropped his hand to his lap and picked at a piece of shell that was stuck to his pants, watching as the dragon tried to flare its wings out.

Ghost moved as he dropped his arm, taking the opportunity to greet his new companion, squirreling into Jon’s lap, front paws pressed an inch from the dragon’s claws. He pressed his muzzle against the dragons who pressed back for a few scant seconds before losing its balance.

Jon laughed as the dragon let out another noise and tumbled backward, out of Jon’s lap and onto the hearth behind it. He settled a hand onto Ghost's back, running fingers through the thick puppy fur as the pup clamored fully onto his lap to get a better look at the newborn.

Eyes crinkling Jon smiled, unable to smother the giggles tumbling out of him at the pairs antics.

For the first time in a long time, Jon felt truly at home.
Interlude: Ned Part I

Ned couldn’t contain the laugh that rumbled out of him as he watched his two sons, both intent on their prey, with their bows drawn tumble to the ground. Their arrows went wide and the two rambunctious direwolves that had knocked into their knees took off after the young buck that scattered at the raucous.

“Ghost!”

“Grey Wind!”

Beside him Storm came to a stop, her head brushing against his elbow as she chuffed. They exchanged a look and after a moment she paced over to a rock and lay down next to it. He followed a moment later, watching as Jon and Robb righted themselves and jogged to retrieve the arrows. They had been hunting all day, roaming the Wolfswood after venison and checking rabbit traps some of the men had set the day before.

“Do you think they realize they are nowhere near big enough to take it down?” he asked quietly, hand running through Storm’s thick fur. She leaned her head against his knee, ears quirking at the distant sound of Grey Wolf’s yips and his son’s curses. A puff of warm air heated his shin as she shut her eyes. “I thought not.”

A laugh caught his attention and he looked up, watching as Robb and Jon wrestled, their bows and quivers, arrows spilling out, scattered around them. It was good to watch them enjoy themselves; to see Jon, especially, just playing. Since the boy had gained memories of a hundred lives moons ago his behavior had ranged from that of a full-grown man to the that of the boy he was physically. His skill's did as well, moments of intricate swordplay interspersed with the awkwardness of still growing youth. Jon’s tendencies toward melancholy and brooding had also increased tenfold to the point that Ned’s lady wife had even pointed it out to him just weeks after the change.

While Catelyn may not have been fond of the boy, she had always watched him analyzing his behaviors to protect her own children. She had long taken the tale of bastards being lustful, envious creatures to heart and tended to try and fit Jon into a box that was wholly inaccurate to most—and especially him.

It was the blunt difference between Jon’s behavior and the dark shadows that had suddenly appeared in his eyes—shadows that should only belong to a tortured soul who’d seen far too much death, destruction, and lost too much—that had helped Ned to take his adoptive son seriously when he had come to him. In as much as the boy’s words had finalized his belief, his demeanor had shaken Ned to the core.

So, Ned had listened and then taken to checking the details and only to find in more cases than not they matched up and those that didn’t could be explained away by lack of a full story or the passage of time. In the end, he couldn’t help but to believe Jon, to believe or risk the dark futures that his son described.

A shadow crossed over him and Ned glanced up, his smile faltering for a second as the little white and blue dragon whirled overhead, circling over him before swooping towards the boys brushing the grass off their breaches and tunics. From her looks, if he hadn’t seen her attempts to cook scraps of meat, Ned would believe her to be an ice dragon of legend.

She was all fire though, even with her looks and despite her name; ‘Winter’, his son had declared
her when he had brought her to him hidden in a basket. She was the size of a small cat now, but he knew that she’d grow too large for a barn one day. Her presence was a reality that Ned was finding it difficult to plan for, more so than the other issues that had been brought up among his long talks with Jon.

Ned wouldn’t deny Jon her though, not with seeing how much she had lifted his spirits and not knowing how quintessential she may one day be in the battle against the Others. A dragon firmly on the side of the North would be a boon when the wights came and if other wars had to be fought.

There were moments that Ned could see the man in his son, grown and weary, tired of battle and longing for family when words spilled from his lips. And, yet, there were times when Jon was nothing more than a three and ten-year-old boy, roughhousing with his brother. He still acted upon the instincts and oft with the mindset of a boy rather than thinking things through with the wisdom of a man.

“Winter!” Jon called out, voice cracking still at end, telling of his bodies pending transformation into manhood.

The little dragon’s feet were in Jon’s hair, wings flapping to keep her balance. She squawked at him as he tried to grab her, hands batting ineffectually.

Robb burst out laughing, eyes shining as Jon untangled her and attempted to smooth his curls. Winter swooped around and landed on a nearby stump, folding her wings and quirking her head, watching the two boys. Winter tolerated most of the Stark household, but outside of Jon, his eldest was one of her favorites. It could have something to do with the treats he snuck her when Jon wasn’t watching.

Ned grinned, fingers tangling into Storm’s thick fur. Today had been a good day, the most relaxing of any he had the pleasure of experiencing in recent months. Home was a mess of emotions and tangled plans. He was glad for the quiet.

Rickon was nearing a year now, a bit quieter on average at night but still not sleeping all the way through. His lady wife’s anger with him over the lie he’d told of Jon’s birth had also calmed slowly and was near non-existent now. Still, the long-standing lie simmered between them.

It had taken days for Ned to work up the courage to speak with her of it and it had not been a pleasant conversation. Her anger towards him had been felt through the entire household for days, leaving some of the servants to gossip about what may have occurred. Wondering if he had broken her trust again.

But he had not, and he did not plan to lie to her again. There was only one secret he kept from her now, another one of Jon’s, but if she asked he would answer truthfully. Ned thought she may ask eventually; too many things were changing, plans beginning to take form, that questions would arise one day that he couldn’t easily explain away.

"Your sister's son," Catelyn repeated, staring at him, her hands frozen in her lap.

It had been inevitable, with Jon knowing the truth, that his wife would be told. If nothing else she deserved the truth, one that he apparently had never shared with her in many worlds. Ned could not bear that her to live with the lie shaming her until her death, whenever it may be in this life.
No matter the pain it caused him; she deserved the truth. His heart was aching as he spoke, almost wishing he could take back the words and return to the status quo between them.

“Aye,” Ned dropped his head, “I promised her to protect him. This . . . claiming him as my son was the only path I could take.”

“Because he’s Rhaegar’s son as well.” Her voice was quiet, hardly above a whisper.

“Their trueborn son,” he said after a moment. “They wed before a Heart Tree on the Isle of Faces.”

“I understand why,” Catelyn said after a few minutes, standing and pacing to the window. “Had the child belonged to my sister or brother . . . I dare say I would have done the same. But you let me believe that he was your bastard. That you lay with another woman for twelve years.”

She turned back to him, muscles tense with fury and her eyes pleading. “Why tell me now? If you have felt unable to trust me with this secret for so long, why now?”

“He knows,” Ned answered honestly, meeting her gaze.

Catelyn’s eyes flashed with anger and chin lifting, she spoke, her voice low and grating, “Get out.”

“Cat—”

“You let me hurt my nephew,” Catelyn’s voice was strained. “Hurt a child, cousin to my children, for twelve years. I wished him dead on more than one occasion. Family. Duty. Honor. Those are the Tully words and you had me sully them.”

“He has always been a child, a Stark—”

“But he wasn’t my family, not when he was a bastard son born of my husband’s dishonor,” Catelyn bit out, fingers clenching on her arms. “You know the difference.”

“He would still have been a bastard to the world had I told you from the beginning,” Ned said.

“We could have figured something out. He could have been Benjen’s!” she spat back. “Benjen hadn’t yet taken the black. Brandon’s, perhaps, if we could work the dates or even a twin for Robb if enough mouths could be bought and oaths sworn. You didn’t even try.”

She turned away, stalking to the door. “I don’t want to see you for the rest of the night. I will speak with you in the morn . . .” Catelyn paused jaw clenching, “or perhaps the day after.”
Interlude: Ned Part II

“Lord Stark?” Ser Jory called as he walked up, eyes scanning the forest before alighting on the boys and dragon roughhousing. He kept his eyes on Winter until he reached Ned, still amazed at the tiny beast. Only the most trusted members of the household and guard had yet to be briefed on her existence, a secret that was getting harder to contain as her energy level and size increased.

Heeding Jon’s words, more so words unsaid than things explicitly spoken of, Ned had taken stock of the spy network in place in the North and then taken what Jon had known from multiple lives of the spy networks of others and acted. He had to be careful, though, so things were slow going as not to arouse too much suspicion. The swiftest course of action wasn’t one he could stomach, to try spies and end them. But many of the crimes had yet to be done and he could not act without cause.

Lord Baelish’s network was one he could not stand to allow the access it once had among the cities and castles of the North. The man’s actions across all of Jon’s lives to house Stark was not something that Ned could allow to come to pass in this one. He had been aware of the man’s infatuation with Catelyn, but the news of his relationship with her sister Lysa . . . Ned was still trying to decide what could be done about that.

Not beheading those that were in the pocket of others didn’t mean the North couldn’t clean house, gain loyalty, and in a few, very rare, cases silence or pay for someone to leave town. The number of people who knew of the dragon currently was within a few dozen, but that would only grow and once her existence was known questions would be asked by more than just those that served him.

He had seen the looks, consideration, sent Jon’s way recently. More than one servant had put the truth together Ned was sure, a few of the older servant’s behavior had even changed as where they once treated him with indifference at best and as a bastard at worst, he was now afforded smiles. That at least made Ned happy for they could have resented his existence instead, especially with a dragon at his side.

Naming the dragon Winter was perhaps the best thing Jon could have done. Between Ghost and the dragon’s name and appearance, those that may have been swayed toward dislike over Rhaegar’s actions in the war were reminded most harshly of the ice side of the boy—the Stark side.

Storm lifted her head, looking up at Ser Jory as the man stopped a pace away.

“Yes, Ser Jory?”

The young man’s gaze shifted away from where Robb was trying to convince Winter to accept his touch, Jon at his side. The little dragon was more standoffish than any of the wolves except when her human was there to coax her. Perhaps it was a species trait or it may have been a testament to how closely Jon’s personality tied with the dragon—and Ghost—for he had noticed his son avoided touch from many people, excepting a few that he had placed his trust in. Mostly his family.

“Tomas and Luca have caught some pheasants, rabbits, and a couple of mud ducks,” Jory reported his lips twitching with mirth. “They did lose a bird to Grey Wind and Ghost, though.” His grin grew. “The pups startled poor Tomas and took it right from his hand.”

“Ghost did?” Ned asked, eyebrow-raising.
“Ghost surprised Tomas,” Jory amended, “but it was Grey Wind that did the snatching.”

*So like their boys,* Ned thought. Like most trouble Robb and Jon got into; it was probably Grey Wind who had planned the deed, Ghost following his lead.

“The cart is full, the cooks will be happy,” Jory said.

Nodding, Ned stood as Storm shifted to her feet. “Boys!” he called, stopping them in place, Winter even turning her attention to him. Glancing down he caught his direwolf’s eye. She chuffed at him before letting out a short howl. He waited until she was done before speaking again, “Time to head back.”

Patting the direwolf’s shoulder, he watched as his sons began searching for their discarded gear. Winter eyed them for a moment before lifting into the air, flapping into the trees. Her scales caught the light for a moment, causing Ned to squint as he watched her go.

*There had been some discussion on when and how to let the rest of the family know of Winter’s existence. After himself, they had told Catelyn together while Jon had shown the little dragon to Robb on his own. Showing the other children had come later, starting with Sansa and Arya.*

*He had called the two girls to his solar, Jon already present with the little dragon, deciding to tell them not only of the dragon but also of his parentage. They were older then Bran and Rickon and more apt to keep their mouths shut or obfuscate the truth if asked. Telling the boys or at least Bran could wait a little while. The little dragon spent most of her time in Jon or Robb’s room at the moment anyway, only leaving to the Godswood at night in a basket.*

“Jon?” Arya was the first to speak when she entered the room behind her father, surprised to see him.

“Arya,” Jon greeted with a nervous smile and then he looked over to Sansa as Ned barred the Solar door, “Sansa.”

“What’s going on?” Sansa asked, looking back at her father a frown playing on her face.

“Jon and I have something to speak with you two about,” Ned said, motioning them towards benches in front of the fire.

Arya glanced over at Jon, scrutinizing him with her grey eyes. “Is this about your mother?”

Sansa’s eyes widened as she sat, looking between her father and Jon. She twisted a lock of red hair, gleaming in the firelight, between her fingers.

“It is,” Jon nodded, biting his lip before kneeling next to a basket on the floor. His direwolf, Ghost was lying next to it red eyes watching it intently. “I have something I want to show you first, though. She’s a bit impatient and doesn’t like being cooped up.”

“She?” Arya frowned, feet shifting under her and fingers fidgeting in her lap as she leaned forward.

Jon glanced at her with a small smile before removing the lid from the wicker frame and reaching a hand inside. Carefully, he lifted the small frail looking form of the baby dragon from its confines.
“Her name is Winter,” he said, shifting himself to give the girls a good view of the dragon.

She blinked at them, shifting herself in Jon’s hold before flaring her wings, flapping them slightly as she pushed herself as tall as she could go without lifting from his hands.

Ned grinned to himself as he watched the play of emotions across his daughters' faces. Shock and awe. Disbelief and others. It took a few minutes before either gathered themselves to speak.

“She’s so beautiful!” Sansa said breaking the silence finally, eyes wide in surprise as she eyed the small dragon. It seemed to preen before her, shifting its wings and body into various poses as Jon smiled slightly at it.

“That’s a real dragon,” Arya stared at Winter for a moment longer, eyes widening, and turned her gaze to stare at Jon. “How come you get a dragon? I want a dragon.” She turned to Ned and asked, “Do we all get a dragon?”

“Of course not, stupid—”

“Sansa,” Ned warned his eldest daughter.

Sansa glared at her sister before dropping her eyes at her father’s warning, frowning. “Jon gets a dragon because of his mother, right?” She looked back up to him, imploringly. “Like we have the direwolves. She was a Tar-Targaryen?”

Jon winced, hand curling in Ghost’s fur.

“Not quite,” Ned answered, wincing, a sad smile tugging his lips. If she had thought further on it, he knew his daughter would have concluded that there were no female Targaryen’s that Ned could have fathered a child on. “Jon’s father left the egg to him. His mother—his mother was your Aunt Lyanna.”

“He’s not our brother?” Arya asked, darting her gaze to Jon, brow furrowing in confusion. Jon had always been the one she was closest to of the children. Ever since Arya had been born with the same dark hair and grey eyes as the boy had; Jon had latched onto her and eventually her to him.

“He’s our cousin?” Sansa asked a moment later, turning to stare at Jon. “Prince Rhaegar was his father.” Her eyes shifted quickly between Jon, the dragon, and back again. “You’re a Prince . . . or would you be a King?” she asked, frown deepening as she tried to decipher the puzzle placed in front of her. As they began to widen in horror, no doubt remembering some of the nastier rumors regarding the late crown prince Ned cleared his throat.

“The Targaryen dynasty was defeated,” he said quickly as he watched Jon shift awkwardly, his son’s eyes drooping to the ground. “While technically he would retain a title by birth, he is without a kingdom and if his true birth status was revealed he would be killed. While Jon is your cousin by birth he has been raised a Stark—raised as your brother—no matter who his birth father is.”

Arya pursed her lips before shifting, moving quickly she wrapped her arms around Jon in a hug, which the boy returned swiftly. “You are my brother. No matter who your true father is,” she paused and leaned back until she could meet his eyes. “You’ll always be my brother.”

“She’ll meet us at the cart,” Jon said as he leaned over to grab his bow and then frowning began
brushing grass off his stained breaches. “I think she just wants to stretch her wings a bit more.”

“Grey Wind!” Robb exclaimed, scowling at the wolf as he bounded into the clearing.

Ned had to smother laughter at the sight of the young wolves as they trotted over to their boys. Grey Wind was covered in mud, feathers, and the occasional patch of blood on his fur. His brother was much more dignified looking, a bit of mud on his paws and a bit of red coloring the fur on his muzzle.

“They better find a water hole to clean up in or you’ll be giving them baths when we get home,” Ned said running a hand over Storm’s back as she walked past to greet her pups. “Else they will be spending the night in the kennels.”

It took perhaps half an hour to reach the spot where the horses were tied up. One of the guards, a man named Benron, had already hitched the cart that carried the catches they’d made. He was standing nearby, eyes locked in a contest with Winter who had made herself comfortable upon the seat.

“Winter,” Jon said, grinning slightly as he reached the cart and settled his bow and quiver in the back.

She chirp-squawked and stood, flapping her wings slightly as she faced him.

“Come off there.” Jon held his arm out and she hopped over until she was at the edge of the seat. He gathered her up and turned to the back of the cart.

Ned sighed as he watched his son place the little dragon in the cage Mikken had worked up. It had enough space for her to turn around, but she couldn’t even flare her wings. He wished that they didn’t have to keep her so hidden, but they would be riding through winter town on the return trip and Ned wasn’t satisfied that the spies had been fully rooted out or that small folk wouldn’t spread rumors of a dragon.

Jon whispered to her, feeding chunks of cooked meat to her as Ned turned and strode to the horses. They had been saddled and readied for the ride home already, relatively calm even as the direwolves settled down nearby to wait for the group to be ready.

He’d set the children to getting the horses used to the direwolves presence and they had done well with task, for the most part. Only one horse had panicked to the point of injuring itself and it had been a relatively minor injury.

Ser Jory came up beside him, advising him of the final count of fowl and hares that had been caught. They both watched as Jon settled a cloth over Winter’s cage, securing it with some rope.

“She’ll not be small enough to hide like that for long,” Jory pointed out.

Ned nodded, sighing. “We’ll come up with an alternative.”

“More oaths?” Ser Jory asked, turning to meet Ned’s eyes. “People break them.”

“Northerners are loyal,” Ned said, turning back to his saddle and mounting up. “The people adored Lyanna. Went to war for her. I can only hope that they will see her and not just . . . I can only hope
that they see her in him and remember that devotion.” At least for the time being. Rumors would spread, but the South had a habit of laughing rumors of the North—as Jon often complained about when discussing the South ignoring the Watches pleas—off and *Ice Dragons*? Rather unbelievable. Right up there with White Walkers and Giant Spiders.
The air was heavy with moisture, fog, and drizzle keeping everything damp; vapor in the cool air sticking to everything from eyelashes to the dirt beneath the horse’s feet. The road was well on its way to becoming a slop of mud. This far north the Kings Road wasn’t as well maintained as it could—should have been. The number of travelers following these roads had declined over the past centuries until the majority that trod the packed dirt were on their way to the Wall to stay.

The evening before last Jon’s father had set he and Robb to calculating the cost and resources that would be necessary to maintain or reroute the road. Their father had been setting them many similar tasks, somewhat to keep them busy, Jon thought, for there wasn’t much to do when riding upon a horse’s back for days.

They were traveling to Castle Black to meet with Lord Commander Jeor Mormont in person and take stock of the status of the Watch. When Ned had announced their trip, it had shocked Jon for a moment, but it was a smart move. Lord Stark couldn’t just take Jon’s word on the details, he had to verify them and appear to gain the knowledge himself else he may be questioned on the veracity of the information.

It was not like his father could just outright tell his bannermen that Jon was a man who’d lived the future many a time and knew what would be coming. They would think both Lord Stark and Jon mad.

The retinue they were traveling with consisted of fifty Stark men and fifteen volunteers from winter town and surrounding holds for the watch, plus an additional three men who had chosen to take the black over other choices: death and mutilation. Not all the Stark men were guards, at least five that Jon had seen were specialists of one type or another such as the two men who had been apprenticing to Winterfell’s master builder for the last three years.

His father meant to fortify the Night's Watch—attempt to force a rebuild that would have it stronger than it had been for centuries—of that Jon was sure. It was something he had never had the time or power to attempt.

He took a deep breath, the chill air tickling the back of his throat causing him to cough a little. His horse flicked its ears and broke its steps for a moment as a long, distant howl sounded and was answered by two others. Jon grinned at the sound; the direwolves had spent much of the trip ranging far from their human companions, disappearing for days only to show up, loping beside their horses or laying near the fire at night.

“Elk?” Robb questioned suddenly and Jon glanced toward him to see a speculative frown on his brother’s face.

Jon paused for a moment, reaching out to Ghost and relaxing into his saddle.
Ghost greeted him warmly as he looked through the wolf’s eyes.

It was an elk, some young buck whose antlers suggested perhaps a year, maybe two, of age. Nothing a hunter would wish to mount on his wall. The elk was limping, already injured.

Grey Wind was circling around the other side while Storm watched to ensure that they would be able to take it down without injury to her pups. It would be their kill though—not hers.

Jon shook his head, taking a deep breath as he came back to himself. “You’re right,” he said nodding, “it is an elk.”

“I wish I had your control.” Robb groused. While the redhead was growing quickly in his own connection with Grey Wind joining with his companion outside of dreams and rare passing moments was out of his skill range as yet.

“You’re getting stronger.” Jon smiled encouragingly, running a hand through his damp hair to press it away from his eyes. The moisture in the air was flattening the curls, near straightening them. “Took me,” he dropped his voice to a near whisper, “years to get it.”

Robb shot him a knowing look that Jon was just getting used to. A few days prior to leaving on this excursion their father had taken him aside and told him the truth of things about Jon. The fact that this was not the first life he’d lived.

Jon wasn’t sure what all had been said between them, but Robb’s behavior had changed little and for the most part had gone back to normal after the first few days on the road where they were living out of each other’s pockets, sharing a tent, sparring, and without anyone but adults surrounding them.

“Where is Winter?” Robb asked suddenly, squinting at the grey sky.

“Around.” Jon glanced upwards, looking for a break in the grey sky as he reached out to her. “Not far.” Winter was strong enough to fly all day but did not dare go too far else she tired or a sudden rainfall were to break out. The dragon didn’t seem to mind the cold, but rain was a different story if she had other options available.

“How far from the wall would you say we are?” Robb asked a while later, breaking the silence. At times like these Jon very much missed his more talkative siblings, especially Arya who was probably still pouting over not being able to come with them.

“A few days more, perhaps,” Jon glanced ahead to where their father was riding beside Ser Jory and one of the builders who had come with them. They had stopped for two days at Queenscrown, detouring from the Kings Road with a small group of men to check the castle over and since had been discussing the most feasible ways to refortify it. “Depending on if the weather holds, of course.”

“I hope it does.” Robb sighed as he dug into his saddlebags and Jon couldn’t help but agree with him. Retrieving a waterskin, his brother took a few long gulps, making a face. He held it out to Jon.

Jon moved his horse close enough that he could take the skin and took a long pull, making a face at the aftertaste. “Did this have spiced wine in it?”

“I think so.” Robb winced. “It must have. Certainly tastes a bit like it.”
Not even good spiced wine at that.

“I think this is the longest I’ve been from home,” Robb said as he returned the skin to the pack.

“I miss it, too.”

Robb nodded adjusting his seating as he wiped the dampness from his face with the back of his hand. “You seemed a bit eager to leave,” he pointed out, a grin growing on his face.

“Yes, well,” Jon shot him a look, “your mother found out about Arya’s lessons.”

Robb’s grin widened though he tried to hide it. Lady Catelyn had been more than displeased regarding the fact her little girl was learning to fight with swords. Somehow the blame had landed on Jon and Theon, missing Robb for the most part though he had taught her more than the Ironborn had.

“Mother will forgive you,” Robb assured him. “I’m sure Arya will spend the entire time we’re gone whining over the matter until someone gives in. Perhaps she’ll even manage to convince Theon to continue teaching her.”

Jon held his hand to his stomach, pressing hard against it. The wound was deep and he could feel how bad it was, how it would require an expert maester’s hand to repair it. They didn’t have a maester anymore, though, for Maester Luwin’s body was sprawled on the ground nearby his body pierced by an Ironborn’s blade.

Bran and Rickon were alive though, Hodor and the wildling woman having taken them into the crypts to hide while Jon led the men against the Ironborn attackers. The battle had been tough and many men died, but they had managed to defeat them.

Arya stood next to him, her lips in a flat line as she held Needle, the sword was red from the blood of men around her.

“You betrayed us.” Arya’s voice was steel, hardened by what she had seen since her trip back from Kings Landing on her own. She had killed before this, Jon knew, but seeing his little sister covered in blood preparing to kill again was something that still shook him.

He would stand through this by her side, though he wished he could be the one to swing the sword. Jon was far too injured to be the one to take his life, unfortunately, and he wasn’t likely to survive it which something that only he and Mikken—who had done the basic patching up of him knew. Laying down and attempting to heal wouldn’t do much to help though.

She took the blade another member of the guard offered her, hefting it carefully. Needle wasn’t the type of sword to be used for beheading. At three and ten Arya was small but surprisingly strong and the sword was a bit smaller than most men’s but incredibly sharp.

“In the name of King Robb....” She made a face and skipped a bit, clearly unable to remember the exact words, “I, Arya, of House Stark sentence you to death.”

Theon had said nothing outside of a few murmured apologies, blue eyes wide as he stared at them and still now he kept his silence, but Jon could see the damp trails tracking down his pale cheeks.
When she swung the sword, it cut cleanly and surely.

A moment later Arya staggered to the side and heaved, spilling bile onto the bloodied dirt of the courtyard. Jon wished he could go to her, but the pain was increasing and a chill was setting in. He was leaning more heavily on Mikken now.

He only hoped that his letter to the Karstarks and Umbers had gotten through, that they would be the ones to arrive before the Boltons came to Winterfell’s “defense”.

“Eventually she’ll realize Arya is not Sansa,” Robb said and squinting pointed to the west. “Is that Winter?”

Jon attempted to follow the line his finger pointed across the sky and smiled after a moment. “Aye, that it is.”

He suspected that Lady Catelyn knew all too well how different Arya was from her older sister and that much of her attempts to shoehorn her into the role of a lady was done out of worry for her future. Arya was expected to marry one day and for a southron lady that meant a different life than it did for some ladies of the north.

But what no one else but Jon knew was that Sansa wasn’t just a lady dreaming of knights, princes, and happy endings. She had within her the potential to be a she-wolf, a warrior Queen of the North. Jon had seen it, multiple times.

Sansa may never be an expert swordsman but she could play the game and keep her people alive. Within her was a strategist of a different type who could bare her teeth and destroy men with words and bring kingdoms to the ground. If the Others had ever been the type to call a parley, Jon was sure Sansa would have won the war for Dawn.

Jon smiled a bit, thinking of the time since he awoke. Out of everyone, excepting perhaps Lady Catelyn, it had been Sansa with whom his relationship had most changed. Especially since Lady Catelyn’s behavior had changed and then when his father had told Arya and Sansa the truth of his parentage.

Sansa had been much more willing to interact with him now that her mother’s glaring eyes didn’t follow them whenever they did so. It surprised him at how often he saw glimpses of the Queen he knew in so many lives. It made him wonder how the changes in this life would affect her growth as, at least he hoped, she’d be able to avoid many of the hard life lessons she faced so often.
Jon yawned, jaw popping as he fed Winter a slice of rabbit from his own dish. She snapped her jaws, carefully avoiding his fingers as she pulled it from his grasp.

Their fire was set the farthest from where the volunteers for the wall and criminals were sleeping, surrounded by tents and Stark men that were trusted and had sworn oaths to keep the dragon’s existence silent. They all called her ‘Winter’ and the word ‘dragon’ was avoided amongst them. Most strangers that heard of her seemed to think she was another direwolf, perhaps helped along by the fact that Bran’s wolf was known to be called Summer.

“Winter,” Robb called from his seat across the from them, the flames flickering and his visage distorting in the smoke. He held up a piece of meat and she quirked her head before flaring her wings back and hunkering down onto her hind legs.

A moment later of his teasing her, waving the meat around to watch her eyes follow it, Robb tossed it into the air, arcing it towards them. She was in the air in an instant, wings flapping through the smoke and disturbing the flames as she caught it midair. Wheeling, she swooped above the heads of a few men before disappearing into the trees nearby.

“Are you bribing my dragon?” Jon asked, raising an eyebrow before taking a bite of venison himself.

“Here I thought you belonged to her!” Robb japed, grinning. “But yes, I suppose I am.”

“Oh?”

“I figure I’ll have a good shot at convincing her to give me a ride one day,” he shrugged and took a bite of food.

“That’ll be years away.”

“Exactly. I have years to convince her I’m worth of at least one ride without her dumping me on my ass or roasting me,” Robb said grinning only to duck a moment later as Winter flew right over his head, slapping the top of his red hair with her tail before crossing through the fire to land at Jon’s side.

Jon smiled at her, gently running his hand over some new scale growths, scratching ever so slightly. She leaned into his fingers and settled her head against his thigh, letting out a purr-like chuffing noise.

“She’s not going to burn the forest down, is she?” Ser Jory asked as he dropped down onto a fur matt nearby, settling his sword at his side. He had a steaming mug in hand which he sipped from.

“Or your tent?”

“She’s good about the fire,” Jon said, shaking his head.

“She’s only set his bedding on fire once,” Robb chuckled at the memory, “and it was only a few small flames before Jon stamped it out. I don’t think I’ve ever seen such a comical look on a dragon before.”

Jon still wasn’t sure what had caused it really—she had let out some cross between a hiccup and a cough, clearly not intending to burn anything—and she had been so surprised over the flames that
she had spit for but a second at the bed he had almost been laughing too hard to put it out. Luckily only one fur blanket had been lost to the accident and it had even been salvageable, somewhat.

“She does like to practice when she can,” he acknowledged, “but she keeps it to helping start campfires, cooking scraps of her meal on rocks, and shooting flames far above the treetops.”

Ser Jory nodded, taking a long pull from his drink as he watched her. “She’ll be a force to be reckoned with one day.”

“Yes,” Jon said, looking down at her watching the glow of the flames shine off her scales. “She will.”

“And our enemies will learn a new meaning to the words ‘Winter is coming’,” Robb said and then burst out laughing at the glare Jon sent his way. Arya had been the first to bring up the matter and it hadn’t been dropped since.

Ser Jory caught up in the laughter as well, nearly spilling his drink. “What had you name her that?” he asked.

“It was her name,” Jon glanced over to him and shrugged. “I couldn’t name her anything else.”

There was a light dusting of summer snow on the ground when they reached the wall; coming upon the gates of Castle Black in the late afternoon. The castle was one of the few on the wall well maintained and even it was showing its age as less and less-skilled workers took the black each generation and fewer resources were provided by the southern lords and throne. It was a situation helped along by the Citadel whose claims of the disappearance of magic and that many of the old legends were nothing more than exaggerated tales to scare little children to stay indoors during the long winters.

No one wanted to believe in the Others and dead rising, so most didn’t and the South always spent years ignoring the cries of the North until they couldn’t.

The funding provided by the Crown and the Wardens had lessened over the centuries but none so quick as in the last—especially since the rebellion when the Targaryen’s were replaced by a Baratheon King whose crown was drastically in debt.

Winter had flown off before they got in sight of the gate, disappearing into the forest and agreeing to meet them later within the castle. If all went to plan, they would be settled into a room with a large enough window for her to fit through.

As the gate opened, admitting them into the castle proper, Jon couldn’t help but watch his father, wondering what he thought of the busy, gloomy setting. Abstractly he knew his father had visited the Wall before, but never with the knowledge he possessed now. He hadn’t known of the war that was to come and how utterly unprepared the men of the Watch currently were.

It would be a long uphill battle to convince the watch to accept any changes, let alone the ones his father had discussed with him during their talks. They didn’t currently have the numbers to support many of them either, and Jon wasn’t sure how much more readily the other kingdoms would accept the pleas for men and supplies from the Warden of the North instead of the Lord Commander of the Wall. Hopefully, they may lend a bit more credence and at least consider aiding.
Lord Commander Mormont had been aware of their pending arrival, ravens having been shared between Lord Stark and he for months prior, and he was in the courtyard to greet them when they drew their horses inside. Jon’s eyes caught on the sword at the man’s hip, the bear-shaped pommel easily visible, and his heart ached. Longclaw was still one of his most beloved memories and treasures in the lives he owned it. It was his favorite Valyrian steel sword.

He was unlikely to own it in this life.

"Last words?" Ser Alliser Thorne glared at him, eyes daring.

Jon had taken one too many risks, had lost the vote for Lord Commander, and after another ‘mistake’, following the death of Maester Aemon, Ser Alliser and his allies had seized upon the chance to end the life of their main opponent. He was just glad that Sam and Edd had gone to Eastwatch several weeks ago at the man’s orders. All of Jon’s friends were either dead, ranging, or posted elsewhere now.

He breathed in the cool air and watched a few flakes of snow land on the block in front of him. A small grin tugging at his lips.

“Just two requests,” Jon said after a moment. “Longclaw should go to Lady Mormont on Bear Island as it’s the Mormont family sword.”

“That’s only fair,” Janos Slynt sneered at him. “It should never have gone to a bastard son of a traitor like yourself.”

Ser Alliser glared at him, silencing the other man. “And?”

“There’s a letter beneath my mattress. I wish it to be sent on to my aunt in Meereen along with notice of Maester Aemon’s death.” Jon glared up at the knight. “As much as I hate you right now, she has dragons and you’ll be needing them if you wish to keep the realm safe. Although I don’t know how happy she’ll be to give it when she finds out you chopped the head off possibly her only living relative.”

He leaned down, resting his chin on the woodblock. “Maybe she’ll burn you along with all the wights.”

The choking sound and cries of outrage would have been amusing if Jon thought Ser Alliser would believe him. He wished he could see the look on the man’s face when Daenerys arrived, but he’d be long gone before then.

“Lord Stark,” Jeor Mormont greeted them, moving to clasp arms with the Warden of the North.

“Lord Commander Mormont,” Ned said, smiling back at the man who then paused to introduce the Officers of the Watch that stood behind him. Benjen was noticeably missing from the group although no one else retained his title.

“And where is my younger brother?” Ned asked after basic pleasantries had been exchanged.
“Due back from a ranging yesterday,” Jeor answered not a trace of worry in his voice. “There was a storm several days ago so they experienced a bit of a delay. We expect him to return anytime.” He motioned towards one of the towers. “We’ve prepared a set of rooms for you and your sons,” Jeor glanced between Robb and Jon. “Your men will be assigned rooms in the barracks with the recruits.”

“That will be fine.”

Jeor paused a moment eyes taking in the forms of the direwolves sauntering through the gate, a few horses skittering away from them. “So Benjen isn’t the only one,” he mused, left side of his lips quirking slightly.

Jon’s brow raised as he glanced at Ghost, the pup trotting over to lean against his side. Uncle Benjen had a direwolf as well? This was yet another unexpected change.

“My brother has a direwolf as well?”

“Aye,” Jeor nodded, eyes taking their fill of each of the three. “A great big black beast. Calls him Midnight. Your wolves are welcome here, but,” he stared at Robb and Jon in turn as he spoke, “you’ll need to keep them under control and pick up after them. I won’t have my men injured or cleaning up at them. If they’re anything like Benjen’s wolf, though, I doubt this will be much of an issue for you.”
“You lived here for years?” Robb asked him quietly as they settled their bags on the small beds in the room they were sharing next to and attached to their father’s room. “In multiple lives?”

Jon shot a look at his brother before rolling his eyes. “Aye.” he opened his bag and removed some clothing to air. The dampness of the road seemed to have reached everywhere. He wrinkled his nose at the musty scent clung to the fabric. “It’s not as bad as first impressions may suggest.”

“Hmm,” Robb quirked a half-grin his way, “honestly I was just imagining Sansa’s face upon seeing the place and men.”

They both chuckled a little at the image and Jon couldn’t help but compare the little sister in Winterfell to the woman who sought him out more than once at Castle Black.

“She came to find me here,” Jon said as the laughter died down, “multiple times.” He laid out his tunic and breaches on a stool near the fire. “She often had a rough go of things. Sansa is stronger than anyone knows.”

“She’s a Stark. Of course, she is,” Robb acknowledged as he sat on his bed, fingers running over Grey Wind’s ears when his wolf jumped up next to him. “You are too large to sleep with me,” he murmured scrubbing fingers gently through thick fur. “You’ll just have to wait until we get home, boy.”

Jon glanced their way and to Ghost who had settled in front of the hearth as he made his way to the window at the back of the room. The shutter was open and he curled his hands over the sill, eyes trailing across the sky. Winter was nearby, he could feel her, staying out of sight until she could join them later when she was less likely to be seen.

They slept well that night, glad to have the comfort of solid walls and a bed of furs warmed by a crackling fire. Winter had joined them, after dark and dinner, curling up on the hearth to rest. She had caught a small rabbit and was incredibly proud of herself. He’d caught glimpses of it and was glad she’d found a large rock to cook it on rather than simply doing so on the forest floor.

Storm had disappeared into the woods north of the Wall after dinner when a ranger had returned from a brief trip to check traps that had been set the previous day. Their father hadn’t done anything but watch her go, shrugging when one of the older men had mentioned him losing his ‘pet’.

He had simply asked that when and if she returned they let her in without question or issue.

Ghost and Grey Wind were curled up in front of the hearth, nose to tail, while Winter was half curled in the fire, tail within the flames. The dragon had been there almost since she came through the window, enjoying the ability to relish the warmth.

A knock on the door that connected to their father’s room broke the near silence of the room. Jon startled from a light sleep, fingers wrapping around the hilt of his dagger as he sat up.

“Father?” Robb asked, bleary-eyed and squinting at the form in the doorway.

Jon’s eyes adjusted first and he grinned, crawling quickly from the furs and shoving the dagger beneath his pillow. “Uncle Benjen!” he exclaimed, moving quickly.
“You’ve grown,” Benjen laughed, hand ruffling Jon’s hair as he pulled his nephew to him in a tight hug. Robb joined them a moment later and Jon stepped back smiling as his brother was encompassed in a hug just as tight. “You as well!”

“You should visit more often!” Robb said, smiling up at their uncle as the three of them stepped back into the middle of the room, making room for Ned to join them. It had been two years since Benjen had last visited during a recruitment trip around northern settlements.

“I heard of your wolves,” Benjen said as he caught sight of the two where they had stood, ears perked at the sudden intrusion into their space. He knelt and held out his hands, palms up. They moved then, nails scratching at the floor as they acted every bit like excited puppies as they greeted the wayward member of the Stark clan. Laughing, he let Ghost lick his fingers as Grey Wind surprised him with a kiss to his face.

Jon caught sight of Winter, grumpily moving off the hearth as his father stoked the fire. Stepping around his uncle he moved to the fire himself and leaning down picked her up, gathering her into his arms.

She was warm from the fire, her tail especially so where it curled around his arm. She was just too large to settle on his shoulders anymore and full from her earlier meal.

“Gods . . .” Benjen breathed, hands stilling on Grey Wind’s scruff.

“Not a God,” Robb said, grinning. “Just a dragon.”

“Her name is Winter,” Jon said, biting his lip as he stepped closer unsure of how much Benjen knew. His uncle stared at the little dragon for a long moment and she tilted her head inquisitively at him. “She’s not too keen on being touched by most people,” he murmured, though his uncle made no move towards her.

“I always wondered,” Benjen said softly, “but never dared to ask if you were Lyanna’s.” He glanced over at Ned. “I knew your mother had left willingly with Rhaegar and it was hard to believe that Ned would . . .” he paused and met Jon’s gaze. “I would tell you of her if you wish,” he said, a soft smile on his face. “There are stories I have from the time Ned was fostering that he doesn’t know.”

“I would like that,” Jon said quickly, voice rough. “Very much so.”

Benjen nodded and then glanced at Ned before turning back to Robb and Jon. “We will have plenty of time in the coming days for stories. Now, though, dawn is nearly here. Get dressed in your warmest furs. Sunrise is a wonder to see from the top of the Wall.”

Jon had died in many, many ways, but none were quite as embarrassing to remember as the time he fell off the wall. It wasn’t in a battle; it wasn’t amid a fight with another black brother. No one betrayed and murdered him.

He was eighteen, a moon after his father had been killed by the Crown and his brother recently slain in battle with the Lannisters when he was assigned watch on a stormy night. Perhaps he was too sure of himself, his footing and knowledge of the Wall after having served there for so many lives at this point. Whatever it was the wind, slick ice, and being just a hair to close to the edge was his downfall.
Jon wondered how long it took for them to find his body and what his brothers had thought of it.

He was much more cautious when cavorting around the top of the seven-hundred-foot tall wall from then on.

The sky was greying with pre-dawn light as they reached the top of the Wall. Benjen carefully led them through the battlements, past trebuchets and weapons built ages ago but carefully maintained by the builders in most cases. He stopped in place on occasion, pointing out places, items, slick spots on the icy walkway, or explaining the reasoning behind different equipment. Jon thought the latter was mostly for their father’s benefit, but he listened with half an ear as he already knew the information his uncle was providing.

The wolves and Winter had been left in the room, though Jon knew the little dragon longed to fly to the top of the Wall herself. It was too dangerous for her, though, as she was still so small. He didn’t believe her wings would be strong enough for the thin air and varying wind gusts that followed the Wall. He wasn’t about to risk her with it.

Benjen took them to one of the larger viewing areas, big enough for them to stand side by side and watch as the sun rose, colors creeping north and westward across the large expanse of territory. It was just as breathtaking as the last time Jon had seen the sunrise from here but more enjoyable for the company.

After a moment, he slanted his gaze to Robb, watching his brother’s expression shift minutely at the exhilarating sight before him.

“It’s beautiful,” Robb murmured, turning to him for a few seconds. “Now this—this Sansa would love to see.”

Jon smiled, eyes turning back to the colors painting a mosaic across the sky. Maybe one day she would, only perhaps this time it would be a happier moment—filled more with smiles than tears teasing at the edges of their sight. More laughter and less somber silence. “Aye, I think she would.”
Holding a hand out to the boy, a young trainee for the watch, Jon smiled at him. His name was Belmyr, Jon thought, a commoner child from the south who’d come in a recent batch of trainees. He’d lived in a port town and looked to perhaps have some Braavosi blood in him. New to the sword he did decently, less apt than the others to lose his balance.

Belmyr was the youngest recruit here and not one Jon recognized. He supposed the boy with his knowledge of ships had probably been assigned to Eastwatch, but he had no idea of how long he’d lived.

“Watch your right side,” Jon said, handing back his sword.

“I’m too busy watching my left,” Belmyr groaned, snatching up his wooden practice sword from the ground. He was of a height with Jon, but perhaps a year or so younger. Not the youngest recruit the watch had ever seen—some young boys saw it as a way out of starving and desperate conditions when the recruiters passed through.

“Have to learn to watch both,” Jon returned and they fell back into a stance, several paces apart. “It’ll come with practice. I’ve had years of training. You’ve had months.”

As they traded swings, Jon holding back to allow the other boy to practice reading his movements and learn to adjust his own, he caught sight of Robb passing by with Grey Wind at his heels as he walked with one of the builders. They had been set to training and following the paths of various members of the Watch throughout their days here, both to learn the ins and outs of the Watch and to get to know the people. Yesterday morning it had been Robb working with the trainees, today it was Jon.

He blocked a blow and grabbed Belmyr’s arm, causing him to freeze. Jon held up a hand and then backed up a pace and slipped into a different stance. “You have good, sure footing. Use it to your advantage.” Belmyr copied his stance as Jon continued, “Your sword and your hands are not your only weapons.” They copied their previous movements, this time Jon following the pattern that Belmyr had. “Sometimes your foot,” he swept his foot out and tapped it at the back of Belmyr’s legs, “is your best weapon.”

“That’s it for now, boys,” Ser Alliser’s voice rang out through the yard and Jon looked up, catching the man staring their way although his words were meant for everyone. “Put away your equipment and get cleaned up. Midday meal will begin shortly and you’ll need your strength for this afternoon.”

The boys and men rushed to follow his words, hunger gnawing at their bellies. Some had missed the morning meal, unused to the early hour that they were fed. If you lay about you risked missing meals as the cook was less apt to make food outside the usual hours unless injury or work was the cause.

“Snow,” Ser Alliser’s voice caused him to pause and Jon grit his teeth together for a moment before turning back and meeting the master-at-arms gaze.

“Yes, ser?” he asked, attempting to keep his face and voice neutral.

“Do you teach your younger siblings?” the knight asked, leaning down to pick up a discarded shield, an annoyed scowl on his face.
Jon blinked, brow tightening before he nodded. “I do. My sister Arya and brother Bran, sometimes.”

“You’ve got a good head for it,” Ser Alliser acknowledged after a moment, looking over him. “Teaching that is. Good eyes for seeing all manner of mistakes as well.”

“Thank you,” Jon said, eyes wide as he stared at the man. This was . . . different. “Thank you, ser.”

“You’re a good fighter from what I’ve seen. If your brother allows it you should consider taking over for Winterfell’s master at arms—Ser Rodrik, I believe?—when he retires,” Ser Alliser advised, setting a hand on his shoulder. “If not then we can always use good teachers to knock sense into the lot we have here at the Wall.” The man stalked off then and Jon stared after him, shocked.

That was entirely not what he had been expecting at all.

He stood there, staring for a long moment before heading to place away his practice blade and head to lunch. There would be plenty of time to mull over this later.

While Jon and Robb were following and learning, watching how the castle operated and learning the skill levels of those within it, Lord Stark spent much of the time with Jeor, Benjen, and the other leaders of the Watch going over details and plans. Discussing the dwindling numbers of the once-grand Nights Watch and the status of the abandoned castles along the wall.

Each night they met with their father, going over what they had learned and learning only a bit of what he had. Jon knew his father was holding back information from them. As the months had worn on since his arrival in this world, Jon had realized that his father was doing his best to take up as much as possible of the mantle that Jon normally wore. In many ways, Jon was thankful for it, glad to be able to just be with his family, but it also made him worried—worried that his father would miss something for all the information Jon had given to him and it would result in his head rolling in the dirt once again.

It was nice though, not to have to be the one to worry over every single detail, even if it did occasionally keep his thoughts racing at night.

Jon had many things to dwell on, but there was one particular thought he had been going over since Winter had hatched. It was something he could act on and that his father had given him permission without reservation to do so.

Five days after their arrival Jon was assigned to assist Maester Aemon in the castles library; to help organize the hundreds of scrolls and books that lined the shelves. They worked in silence for some time after the Maester gave him the initial instructions, going through the scrolls that littered the floor and books that were stacked haphazardly in places that none should be. The Maester’s current steward was certainly lacking, for all that the young man was one of the few fully literate men at the wall. Nothing about how the room was currently organized would make it easy for the blind Maester to navigate and locate material at a moment’s notice.

“Out with it,” Maester Aemon said into the silence eventually from where he sat on a chair near the fire, fingers running over the pages of an old book.

Jon stilled.

“I may be blind, but I have had decades to learn when a person has something they wish to speak of, but cannot get out.” The man turned his head slightly in Jon’s direction.
He swallowed and set several books back on the stack he’d picked them up from. “I do,” Jon said after a long moment, biting his bottom lip before nodding slightly to himself. He moved across the room slowly, dropping into the chair across from the Maester.

“Yet you are saying nothing,” Aemon said, leaning forward slightly. “Nothing you say or ask will insult me, boy. I have heard all manner of things within these walls and before.”

“It’s not that,” Jon said quickly, hands clenching on his thighs. “I don’t have a question—well I do have questions—but mostly I have something to tell you.” He paused, swallowing; his mouth suddenly felt very dry. “I just don’t know how to—how to begin.”

“Then start at the beginning,” Aemon leaned back, settling back into the chair. “I always find that is the best part when one is at a loss for words.”

Jon smile slightly and then sighed, searching for the words. “The beginning,” he said softly. “My mother was—was Lyanna Stark.” He looked up, watching his some-great uncle’s face.

The man had frozen, brow tightening for just a tick before he moved, reaching out a shaking hand towards Jon. Moving forward quickly to the edge of his seat, Jon caught it gently.

“And your father?” Aemon asked, voice rough and wavering.

“Rhaegar,” Jon whispered. “Rhaegar Targaryen.”

The Maester’s breath caught and he grasped Jon’s hand tightly. “I hadn’t thought . . .” he paused and motioned Jon forward with his free hand. “May I?”

“Yes. Yes, of course,” Jon answered standing and moving forward stooped to kneel in front of the elderly man. He lifted the Maester’s hand to settle against his face as the man rested the fingertips of his other hand against his cheek.

Jon closed his eyes as rough, warm fingers traced his features, taking in details that eyes no longer could.

“You have a lot of Stark in you,” Aemon said several long minutes later as his fingers traced around Jon’s eyes, “but your brow, the shape of your eyes and lips . . . those certainly are from your father’s blood.” He touched Jon’s curls before settling on his nape and then his shoulders.

“Aye,” Jon acknowledged, “I have a lot of my mother . . . Lord Stark says I am paler than her, but my eyes are the Stark grey, my hair so dark its nearly black.”

“Curly, though,” Aemon mused as he ran his hand down Jon’s arms. “You have your father’s build, I believe. Though it is hard to tell as you are still young and men can change much in size up through their late teenage years.”

“You met him?”

“A few times,” Aemon smiled sadly. “There was not much cause for the royal family to visit me, but I was family and each member met me at least once except Viserys and the younger children. Your father more than others, but perhaps it was just as much that he was interested in the books that this library held as he was meeting an old man. I shared letters with him and his mother. They kept me up to date with the family.”

“Did you know of my mother?”
Aemon smiled softly, sadly, and touched his cheek. “He wrote to me once of her. That he cared for her and of her beauty. He spoke of the tourney at Harrenhall. It was the last letter I received from him.”

Jon’s eyes shifted over the man’s shoulder, stopping on the window, open to let in the sunlight. “There is someone I would have you meet,” he said a moment later, shifting his legs and moving to stand. “Wait here for a moment, please.”

The Maester raised an eyebrow but nodded, head tilting as he listened to Jon move about the room.

Winter was there moments after he reached the window, alighting on the sill with a gentle ease. He smiled at her, running fingers lightly over her head before gathering the small dragon to him. She hopped forward into his arms, something he was realizing she was getting nearly too big to do easily.

Bringing his right arm up to steady her as she settled her feet on his left, he crossed the room back to the fire. Once there he used his foot to bring the chair he’d been sitting on closer to Maester Aemon’s and gently settled Winter onto it. She swirled on it several times until she was facing the old man, head tilting inquisitively at him.

Maester Aemon was frowning, Jon noticed, blind eyes staring in their direction.

“May I take your hand?” Jon asked softly.

Aemon nodded and held out his right hand. Gently wrapping his fingers around Aemon’s bony wrist, and after mentally checking with Winter, he gently settled the elder Targaryen’s fingers against the crest of her scaled head.

Winter bumped her head up against the man’s fingers gently, sliding the slightly rougher scales of the top of her head against the shaking digits. She let out a light squawking chuff-purr and her third eyelid slid partway across her eyes.

Aemon gasped, breath leaving his body in a rush, eyes widening before squinting as they glistened with unshed tears.

Jon released his wrist. “She won’t hurt you. She recognizes your Targaryen blood . . . and I’m here.”

“How?” Aemon managed to ask as he ran fingers over her scaled body. For her part Winter was staying mostly still, shifting only slightly at his attentions—attentions she was clearly enjoying.

“Rhaegar left an egg for me with my mother . . . I’m not sure why but she hatched about 6 months ago.”

“Dragon’s do not have a gender,” Aemon said, smile still growing.

“I know,” Jon said, moving to lean against the chair. “But she felt like a she to me.”

“And her coloring?” Aemon asked after a few minutes as he gently caressed one of her wings.

“Mostly a white-silver with blue accents around her eyes, claws, back, and wings. They range from a pale blue as light as a summer sky to near dark as midnight,” Jon said, smiling down at her. She lifted her head, opening her eyes to stare back at him. “Her name is Winter,” he added after a moment. “She does breathe fire though.”
“I should hope so!” Aemon laughed. “She is most certainly of Valyrian descent. They are much different than the description of ice dragons of legend.”

Jon stared at the dragon before him, its eyes were blank and it had not responded to its attempts to garner its attention.

“Please Rhaegal,” he murmured softly, more to himself than anything. The dragon had already attempted to burn him and he stood naked before it his sword on the ground near his feet from the loss of the scabbard.

There was no one nearby, Viseron had been injured, fallen to the ground behind him. Jon himself had broken his arm when they’d been knocked out of the sky by Rhaegal and the man controlling him. Jon had no idea where Daenerys and Drogon were. Hopefully, they still lived.

“Please,” his voice was a hushed whisper as he desperately clawed mentally towards the dragon that in some lives he shared a flimsy bond with. In this life, he’d been with the golden dragon instead, his brother Aegon bonded with Rhaegal.

But Aegon was dead and an Ironborn madman sat on his dragon’s back.

Jon would find that horn and burn destroy it he vowed to himself. This wouldn’t happen again. Not if he could help it.

He let his eyes closed as Rhaegal roared and drew close, mouth widening and teeth as sharp as daggers glistened with saliva in the dying sunlight.
“Jon,” his father called, standing the doorway between their rooms. “Come, please, I have a few questions to ask.”

“Of course, father,” Jon said, dropping the book he’d been reading onto his pillow. It was a tomb on caring for dragons. It was Maester Aemon’s, a treasured copy and one of the few items he still possessed from his time before joining the Watch. He’d gifted it to Jon, who had taken it quite reluctantly. The man had insisted that he have it, however, citing that it would be of more use to him then on a shelf at the wall with an old blind Maester who couldn’t see the words and pictures on the pages.

Ned waved him to sit and followed once the door had been shut. He paused near the fire to stoke it and settled a new log within it.

“I am sending Ser Jory and half a dozen men, along with your Uncle Benjen, to treat with Mance Rayder.”

“You are?” Jon asked, jaw-dropping open. “Now? I mean I know we talked about perhaps reaching out to him, but . . .” he trailed off as his father settled into his own seat. “I didn’t realize it would be so soon.”

“When should it have been?” Ned asked, raising an eyebrow. He sighed and shook his head. “I cannot in good conscious allow them to be added to the army of the dead or be lost to the cold of winter. We have limited time to build homes and farms to support their population.”

Jon knew that it was something he had discussed with his father quite often . . . how unprepared the North—and the South—had been for winter, especially after the long wars leading up to and during it.

“The scouts to survey the Gift and New Gift both bring back news of vacant farms, more than previous census’ had detailed.” Ned ran a hand over his face. “I ordered the bannermen to complete a new census. It seems the last few may have been . . . lacking.”

It had been, Jon knew. In some areas, the population had grown, especially around the larger settlements, but in others, it had dwindled. Overall, however, the population was much larger than they had thought. Even the hill tribes that kept away from the rest of the Northerners, for the most part, had a larger population than expected. It was an influx of population that drained supplies when many came to Winterfell’s winter town after the Bolton’s fell in some lives, or at the start of winter in others. They couldn’t turn them away, either, the hill tribes shared blood as Arya Flint had married into House Stark just three generations back. Blood ties were very important to northerners.

“I want to bring them south with enough time for them to build something for themselves,” Ned continued. “To find a place that fits both their own and our rules and to do so at a pace that will allow the land to support them and the rest of the North to grow used to them.”

“The Umbers,” Jon said softly.

“Aye,” Ned agreed. “Them and others. We’ve been at war with the wi—Free Folk for a long time. It will take years to soften relations.” He glanced over at the fire as a log popped with an explosion of sparks across the hearth. “I also hope that we may be able to preserve the Giants.”
“That would be nice . . . there are so few of them left.” He grinned sadly, remembering too often how the giants lost their lives in the War for Dawn—or before—their culture but a memory that would be nothing but stories within a generation. “You have a place in mind for them?”

His father nodded. “Several. I plan to offer them a choice, of course.”

“Of course.” Jon smiled, dropping his gaze to his hands. Lord Stark was more than willing to negotiate with the wildlings. It was nice, to know that his father had listened to him and wasn’t going to just force the free folk to change to fit in. He was going to offer them choices and mean it. Negotiate without forcing self-serving terms upon them so they could move freely through the wall. “Thank you,” he said softly.

“Thank you,” Ned replied. “If even a quarter of what you have told me were to have come to pass in this world . . . If we can stop even a small percentage of it from taking place . . . Negotiating and living beside those we used to fight with will be worth it.”

“I can’t expect the men of the Watch are happy.” He leaned back on his seat, fingers running against the thick cloth of his breeches.

Ned let out a laugh, shaking his head. “No, they aren’t, but Lord Commander Mormont has seen things. As have others.”

Jon glanced over at his father, wondering if those things included what was no doubt already occurring at Crastor’s Keep. He was reminded again of another face he would like to save. Gilly. But if he stepped in now little Sam would never be born. It was a new conundrum amid a sea of hundreds for him as he had cared for the child and watched him grow in a dozen or so lives.

“Mormont agrees with me that taking action sooner is better than being caught unprepared,” Ned met his eyes again, “plus I think he is thankful for the promise of men, supplies, and assistance in rebuilding other castles to prepare for the worst.”

“Some won’t agree,” Jon pointed out, remembering his own death—the first one and several others—at the hand of black brothers.

“A complete consensus would be impossible,” Ned acknowledged, “but he is the Lord Commander. I have insisted that he keep a loyal guard for his own protection. While the Watch is beyond politics they do still owe some loyalty to the Stark family and the North. I believe he will listen to the advice.”

Jon hoped the old bear would as well. His death had always hit the Watch hard and left it in chaos, easily snatched up by those seeking power rather than to protect the realm.

“He’ll want to meet with you,” he said a bit later, “Mance.”

“I know. Ser Jory is taking one of Maester Aemon’s ravens with him. They will send word to Castle Black if he agrees to a meeting.”

“How long are we staying here?” Jon asked, frowning. He had thought they would not be here for much longer.

“Not much longer. We will be leaving for Eastwatch within the sennight. When we get there hopefully an answer will be waiting for us.”

“They may just kill them,” he ventured. Not all free folk listened before attacking—especially those they called southerners.
Mormont has had his men spreading the word amongst those that have somewhat friendly relationships with the Watch since before we left Winterfell. I have hope that Mance Rayder has heard and will want to meet with us.” Ned paused for a moment, standing to walk over to his desk where a pitcher and glasses set. He continued as he poured, “I hope that men baring Stark emblems will cause the free folk to pause and speak rather than attack as they so often do with the Nights Watch.”

“They may, depending on who they meet.” Jon hoped that it wouldn’t be the Thenns. “How long will we stay at Eastwatch?”

“It depends,” Ned hedged. “If we haven’t heard after a time then we will head south to Last Hearth and then home.”

A knock sounded at the door.

“Father?”

“Come in, Robb,” Ned called, and they both watched as Robb opened the door, eyes landing on Jon before going to his father.

“Is everything all right?”

“Yes,” Ned said, setting the glass he was holding down. “How was training today?”

Robb frowned, crossing into the room, Grey Wind and Ghost following at his heels. “Better, I think, but the standards here are not . . . They do not come close to the standards for Winterfell’s guard.”

“No,” Ned agreed, sighing. “They don’t. When Jon told me of how the Nights Watch fared,” he paused, “I had hoped he was exaggerating or that it would not be so in this world. As that was not the case, it is our duty to help repair the Watch.”

“It is nothing like the stories Old Nan tells,” Robb said, moving to sit next to Jon on the bench near the fire.

Jon smiled as Ghost pressed his face into his chest and rubbed at the direwolf’s ears. “I was shocked the first time I came here. I had believed it was an honor to join the Watch,” his eyes darted up to his father’s, “and it was but—but the Watch was in tatters and filled with few but criminals sent to live their days in exile at the wall rather than face execution or mutilation as punishment.”

“And you didn’t go home?” Robb asked.

“No,” Jon glanced at his brother and shook his head. “Father was in Kings Landing with the girls and I—I had too much pride.” He hadn’t wanted to beg Lady Catelyn to allow him to stay in Winterfell and hadn’t wanted to be labeled craven. Grey Wind shouldered his brother aside to press his face against Jon, peering up at him.

“Never let that stop you from coming home again,” Robb said softly, wrapping an arm around Jon’s shoulders. “I can’t imagine a life where I wouldn’t welcome you home with open arms.”

“It is not shameful to admit when you are wrong.”

Jon glanced up at his father’s words and smiled, ducking his head. He let out a soft laugh as Grey Wind’s tongue kissed his cheek and he settled a hand on top of the wolf’s muzzle leaning his
forehead down against the wolf for a second before sitting up and nodding to his brother. “All right. If I’m ever in that position again I promise, I’ll come home.”

“Gods willing you won’t be,” Robb said, his free hand running through Ghost’s fur as the wolf sought attention.

Gods willing.

Robb stared at him, eyes ice blue and face a hard mask. The air around him was cold and Jon could already hear the whispers threading through the crowd. He dropped his eyes as the red-haired man turned, bidding him to follow, voice cold and emotionless.

“Why?” his brother asked, several minutes later inside the newly proclaimed King’s tent. “Why have you come, why now?”

Because Father is dead again. Because Arya died as well this time. Because after so many lives trying to get the path at the Wall right something even worse happened. There were so many things he could say, but only one he should voice. “I had to,” Jon said, staring at Grey Wind who lay across Robb’s bed, eyeing him with narrowed yellow eyes. “I couldn’t not.”

“You swore a vow.”

“They killed Father and Arya,” Jon shot back, voice tight. “Bran and Rickon are gone . . . you trusted Theon when I warned you—”

“He was my brother. More so than you were!” Robb strode forward, stopping inches away, anger burning in his eyes. “You abandoned us for the Wall without even saying goodbye and now you abandoned oaths to do what? Help clean up a mess that your abs—”

“I warned you,” he stared back, voice rising. “I told you he wasn’t to be trusted. I sent a letter telling you that Tyrion had nothing to do with the attempt on Bran’s life. And now because Tyrion is dead so is Arya and so is Father!” And so too may be hundreds of thousands more in the near future, Jon thought. But that was not something he could give voice to. Robb wouldn’t understand. “And because you trusted Theon more than me so are Bran and Rickon. So yes, I had to come.”

“To make me kill you, too?” Robb turned away, fists clenching. “To make me watch as my own sword steals another family member from me?”

“Take my head if you have to,” Jon said, voice quieter after a long moment. “You can if you wish. Or you could let me try and free Sansa for you first. Either I die at your sword or I die attempting to free our sister. Your choice.”

“Why?” Robb asked again, voice breaking at the end. “Why did you come here only to make me choose between your deaths?”

“I’m sorry.” Jon paced forward, hand hovering over Robb’s shoulder. “I cannot change the choices I have already made in this life. I would if I could.”

“Free Sansa or die.” Robb turned back to face him. “You will leave at first light. If you cannot free her you will not return. If you do I will—I will,” he shut his eyes tightly, “I will take your head.”
The party they left Castle Black with was much smaller, consisting of only a couple dozen or so men. Another party of Stark men had gone west to survey the castles along the wall in that direction. Overall their retinue while much smaller was still good enough in size to fair well against the types of obstacles they may face this far North. They were most worried about bands of wildlings ranging past the wall, especially the farther they got from the manned fortifications.

They stayed at least a night in each of the castles, usually several, taking stock of what would be necessary for repairs and making an accurate accounting of how many people could be appropriately garrisoned. One of the master builders that had made the trip to Castle Black was with them, the other had gone with the group to survey the castles on the way to the Shadow Tower. The man was young, having trained for several years under the master builder that oversaw Winterfell’s maintenance and construction projects after having completing years of training in the basics and other essentials. He was originally from the North, a third son of a nearby vassal, but had trained in the south in a guild collegiate.

The castles were in varying degrees of disrepair, although each had Lord Stark frowning as he spoke with the builder. For the most part, the overall structures seemed in good shape, it was the sections with the most wooden supports or that were open to the weather that needed the most repair. A chunk of ice had fallen from the top of the wall along with some old equipment at some point and taken out part of a tower at one of the castles.

While the castles were surveyed, the rest of the group took turns hunting and searching the castles for things of use, looking for anything that the Watch may have left behind. Jon, Robb, and two Stark guards spent the days and evenings exploring when they were at the castles, taking their turn with hunting while on the road, Grey Wind and Ghost trailing with them after game.

Most of the castles were empty, stripped of items and furniture when the Watch abandoned them or perhaps by thieves. But not always, sometimes there were still items of use or furniture left behind.

“I think this was the armory,” Robb said, pushing a door open, the top hinge was damaged or rotted away and hung a bit oddly. He shifted the torch he held in his left hand into the room as he peered into the darkness.

“Oh really,” Jon asked, leaning over his brother’s shoulder, “I wouldn’t have guessed.” He dodged the attempted kick at his shin they entered the room. His cheek passed close to the torch, a breath of warmth kissing his skin; Robb pulled the torch to the side quickly and then sighed, raising an eyebrow at him.

Jon sent him a sheepish look before taking stock of the room they’d entered.

It was near empty, some broken shields stacked along a wall, blades that had seen far better days settled on hooks or fallen to the floor. Pieces of armor were scattered about in varying conditions.

Luca, one of the guards, entered behind them and, after casting a look about the room, lent down to pick up a helm, tilting it to show a dented hole covering nearly one entire side. “Nothing of use here,” he said and dropped it to the ground.

It clanged and bounce-rolled a few feet until it rested against a wooden chest that had seen better days. The slats of wood that made it were warped in a few places, but the on its front still seemed
“What’s that?” Robb asked, stepping closer as Luca knelt to examine the chest.

Jon took the torch from his brother and stepped closer to give them enough light to examine it. He watched them check the hinges and lock before using a sword to shimmy the top open, breaking the lock and one of the hinges in the process.

“Well, it isn’t gold,” Luca mumbled, scowling at the contents.

“Like the Watch would’ve left gold lyin’ round,” Wildem scoffed as he shifted the stack of shields with his foot. “They’d have taken any true treasures with them.”

“Depends on your definition of treasure,” Robb said leaning over the chest and reaching inside. After a moment, he shifted back on his heels and held a small object up towards the torchlight and Jon.

Jon’s eyes widened. It was a small and dark black, but the edges glittered green and blue in the flickering light. He stepped closer, handing the torch to Luca as he knelt next to Robb.

The chest was filled to the brim with hundreds more objects of the same size. Little gleaming black arrowheads.

“Dragonglass,” he breathed out, lips tugging up into a smile.

Ygritte grinned up at him as she attached another dragonglass arrowhead to a shaft as he worked on fletching another. They were sitting perhaps a foot apart in the large great room, near the hearth where the heat from the fire allowed them to forgo their thicker furs. Ghost was lying nearby, eyes closed in a restless sleep, ears quirking at the sounds of people moving around nearby.

The supplies they were using was scattered about them, perhaps a chaotic mess to an outsider but they had a system.

Jon smiled back and opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted as footsteps entered from the open door. A mop of messy red hair peered at them from the darkness of the corridor, face nervous as he peered at them.

“Ain’t no monsters in here, boy,” Ygritte said, beckoning him over with a soft grin. “Just me and your brother.” The change in her countenance when it came to children always awed Jon, be it Rickon, little Sam, or any other child that wasn’t misbehaving. The soft smile gentled her face in a manner he adored.

“Rickon, what’s the matter?” Jon asked, setting down the arrow he was working on as the little boy padded up to him. Shaggydog had followed him into the room greeting Ghost, who peered at his brother with red eyes at half-mast, before curling up next to the white wolf.

“I had a bad dream,” Rickon mumbled, voice still thick with sleepy. “You and ‘gritte died and Shaggy ran off and I was alone. Then you came back but you were dead and Bran was with you.” Jon pulled the boy down into his lap and ran fingers over the curly red hair. “But Bran was dead, too, and everyone ate me.” His voice broke into a sob.
Jon exchanged a glance with Ygritte over the top of Rickon’s head as he murmured reassurances to the boy. They were at Greyguard castle along with a small force of wildlings and some of King Stannis Baratheon’s men. Rickon had been with them for several moons now, he and the wildling Osha had been found near the Nightfort, the woman near death from infection.

Rickon hadn’t recognized Jon at first, years of distance and the boy’s young age had confused him. It had been Ghost that had allowed the boy to believe that Jon was his older brother. Since their reunion, the boy had stuck by his and Ygritte’s side like a burr. He’d refused to leave for the safety of Last Hearth, insisting on staying with them, Shaggydog’s reaction forcing the matter.

“It was just a dream,” Jon murmured into Rickon’s hair, hand rubbing against his brother’s back in soothing circles.

Rickon let out another sob, his fingers clenching in Jon’s shirt. It was hard to reassure him; the boy had lost so much already. Losing the little family he had left was something he could easily imagine.

“Dreams aren’t nothing to fret over, lil’red,” Ygritte said softly, shifting closer.

Jon glanced over at her, their eyes meeting for a moment and he managed a small smile. She had taken to him quickly, treating him as a little brother and, with the death of Osha, also taking over somewhat as a mother figure for the young boy. Jon himself found himself filling his father’s shoes. It wasn’t a role he was used to.

She continued, “Dreams are warnings, true, but it’s up to you how to react to them. You can either cry about it or do your level best to make sure they won’t come true.”

Rickon shifted on Jon’s lap, turning his head to face her. “How do you do that?” he asked, biting his lip.

“There’s a lot of ways,” Jon spoke up then, pulling back from where he’d been resting his chin on his brother’s head. “Most importantly you never give up.”

“Right,” Ygritte said, nodding as she quirked a grin at them. “And I can think of a way you can help right now.” She used the arrow shaft she’d been working on to poke the little boy’s side gently.

“How?” Rickon blinked bleary, red-rimmed eyes at her.

“We have a pile of arrows to make whose tips can pierce the heart of the Others.” She leaned in, her blue-grey eyes sparkling in the firelight. “Have you ever put arrows together?”

Rickon shook his head.

“No?” Ygritte gasped, feigning shock. “Well then,” she said, patting the space between her and Jon. “Come on, I’ll show you how.”

Ned stared at the contents for a moment before picking up one of the arrowheads, holding it up to the light. “How many are there?”

“We have yet to do a full accounting,” Rob answered, trading a look with Jon, “but we believe
there to be around a thousand.”

Jon nodded his agreement when their father glanced his way. Near a thousand was accurate if his memory was correct; minus the two dozen Jon had pocketed. With the changes already made, he couldn’t be sure how the White Walker’s timeline would play out and he wasn’t going to risk all their lives with just Ice and a small dagger on hand—not when other options were available to him.

“Do you have the supplies to rework some of our arrows?” Ned asked, looking up at them again.

“Yes, Father.” Robb nodded, glancing at Jon again, *I told you so* clear in his crystal blue eyes.

He rolled his eyes at his brother and shrugged a little. “We do, Father.”

“We can even fletch some new ones without issue, Lord Stark,” Luca put in from where he stood near the entrance to the room. He had helped them lug the chest into the room. “I know Lord Jon has been whittling sticks and saving feathers from our catches since we left Castle Black.”

He flushed a little at being caught, not that he had been trying to keep his actions a secret. The title also caught him off guard, but it wasn’t too surprising. The men on this trip had quite a bit more interaction with Winter and he then most men had with him previously. Their growing respect for him and seeing how Lord Stark treated him had caused swift changes in how he was treated. There had been no whispers of ‘bastard’ among anyone in the retinue for months.

Jon wasn’t sure how to deal with the change as him not being a bastard wasn’t something that should be known at all outside of the family. The men likely had guessed the truth of his parentage, but most should still view him as a bastard seeing how it was common knowledge that Prince Rhaegar had been married to Princess Elia Martell.

“Jon?” Ned asked, raising an eyebrow, question clear without him having to speak it.

He shrugged, gaze landing on the chest. He had known there were caches of dragonglass hidden about the various castles, but not which ones. While Jon had retrieved caches before, he hadn’t retrieved this one—or if he had he couldn’t remember it.

“It was something to do,” Jon answered finally. “I didn’t want to waste the feathers either. They were in well enough condition to be of use. Still are.”

His father surveyed him for a moment before he nodded and tossed the arrowhead back into the chest. “We’ll stay here another night while Trayton checks the rest of the towers for structural damage.” Ned sighed and pressed his lips together. “Robb, Jon,” he glanced between the two, “I want you to work on making as many new arrows as you have supplies for with the dragonglass. If any of the men wish to assist they can, but I want them searching the other rooms while you work.”

Jon could see his brother’s shoulders tense as he withheld the groan he certainly wished to release and understood how he felt. Spending an entire day fletching arrows was not something he wished to do either, but it was a task that needed doing.

“Yes, Father,” Robb answered for them, none of the hidden annoyance audible.

Later Jon fully expected he would get an earful about not getting to explore the rest of the castle; hopefully, his brother would easily accept the truth that Jon hadn’t known the dragonglass was there. He was still kicking himself mentally for not knowing. He should have. It was an important detail that he should have known.
“I was wondering what you were keeping that bag full of feathers for,” Robb said later as they settled into a relatively clean room on the ground floor hours later.

The builder had very carefully surveyed and approved living quarters for all of them, ensuring that the rooms were safe and would not collapse or have a risk of the floors above them coming down on their heads. The room had been a bit musty when they entered, but they had opened both windows, one of the shutters completely falling off as they did so, and started a fire, after checking the chimney, to air it out.

Winter was curled up on the hearth, belly full, nose to tail as she snoozed. She had helped start each of the fires and had been rewarded handsomely with a scrap of meet each time she successfully breathed fire onto dried logs, not even requiring kindling.

“I didn’t know,” Jon admitted quietly. “I didn’t remember that they were there.” He ran a hand through his curly hair, fingers scratching at his scalp. “I’m not sure if I ever knew they were. It’s not a secret I would have kept.”

Robb frowned, shooting a look at him. “What were you gathering all that stuff for then?”

“Practice. To avoid waste,” Jon said, repeating what he’d said earlier in essence. He pulled out the bag he’d stuffed the arrow shafts in and tossed it onto the ground nearby. The clatter caused Ghost and Grey Wind to lift their heads. They were laying on the furs Robb and Jon had set up on one side of the room to share. This castle wasn’t one that had usable furniture remaining.

Robb eyed him for a long moment. “That can’t be the only reason,” he said, eyes narrowing.

Jon sighed and glanced down at the bag that carried the rest of the arrow making supplies he’d brought with him. “I—I have a friend among the Free Folk,” he answered finally and then winced. “Or I did in other lives.” He settled onto the floor and began to set out the supplies, organizing them in a rote way.

“And they like arrows?”

“She was an expert marksman, better than near anyone else I have ever seen wield a bow,” he said flushing, eyes dropping to stare at his hands. “It’s silly but—but I thought if we happened to see her, that I might give her some arrows.”

“Some dragonglass arrows?” Rob asked, dropping down onto the floor near him.

“I told you I didn’t remember about the dragonglass before we found it.”

“But after we did.” Robb poked his leg. “I know you took some arrowheads.”

Jon shrugged, reaching out to grab some feathers from the bag.

“You liked her,” Robb said after a moment of silence. “No. You loved her before, didn’t you?”

“Every—” Jon swallowed thickly, “—every life I knew her.” And perhaps every other life, too. Loving someone didn’t just go away when they did. Romantic, familiar, or the love of friends. It stuck with you, no matter how long it had been. The taste of it thick and sometimes sweet and sometimes sour every time you thought of it. Jon had loved and been loved by many over his
lifetimes. Some stuck with him stronger than others. Even in the lives they were enemies and hated each other, he still loved them.

“So you thought to give her them as a gift?” Robb asked quietly.

His eyes slid shut and he let out a laugh. “She’d make fun of me for this, I think.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s how she was—is. She’d jape and mock me, but I think she’d take them anyway.” Jon smiled, glancing up at his brother from behind his curls. “She’d probably say something about how she thought southron lads brought their ladies golden jewelry, sparkling with jewels or silk dresses and ask me where hers is. But the arrows would please her more than anything.”

“Huh.” Robb snatched one of the arrowheads from satchel they’d brought in from the other room, turning it over in his hand.

“What?” Jon asked, raising an eyebrow.

“She sounds like she kept you on your toes,” Robb said and then met his eyes. “Like she was able to drag you out of your silences. I hope I get to meet her one day.” He snatched up a few other items. “Will you tell me more of her?”

Sighing, Jon looked away, eyes drifting towards Winter. “The person I would speak of doesn’t truly exist, yet,” he thought of all the changes they would hopefully be making, “and may never.”

“So?” Robb pushed at his shoulder and settled a hand around the nape of his neck. “I wish to hear of the woman who stole my brother’s heart in multiple lives.” He was grinning when Jon looked back at him.

Jon stared at him for a moment and then chuckled a little, focusing back on the arrow shaft he was working on. “Wouldn’t you rather hear about the women that stole your heart?”

“My—Who—” Robb drew his hand back, eyes widening as he flushed. “I don’t know her yet, do I?”

Biting his cheek, Jon shook his head. “Not yet.”

There was a momentary silence as Robb stared at him before drawing in a shaky breath. “Perhaps it is not such a good idea to speak of might have beens.” He turned back to the arrowhead he had dropped into his lap. “At least not romantic ones.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Jon nodded, glad for the deflection, grinning behind a curtain of curls in the dim light. “It wouldn’t be fair to set unfair expectations.”

“Right,” Robb murmured thoughtfully. “Unfair expectations.”

Robb stared at the brunette woman before him, eyes with a focus Jon knew from many lifetimes with his brother. He danced his gaze between the pair.

“Your grace,” Margaery Tyrell dipped into a graceful bow.
“Lady Tyrell,” Robb returned, stepping forward to take her hand and place a gentle kiss upon it.

She smiled sweetly at him, lips tugging up at the sides and Jon was nearly taken in by her beauty as well. He’d known her well, over a dozen lives, and while her temperament was foremost sincere, she was also well trained by her Grandmother in how to play the game.

He watched the interaction, eyes taking in the details of the party before them. It wasn’t often that the Tyrell’s sought out the Starks. But perhaps the early death of Renly Baratheon alongside Lord Stark at the hand of King Joffrey had spurned it. Eyes flickering over the Tyrell party something had him frowning. Something or someone was missing.

“The Lannisters have stolen my brother Loras from us just as they stole your father and hold your sisters captive in Kings Landing,” Lady Margaery was saying when Jon focused back onto the conversation. “My lord father and elder brother have sent me with an offer of alliance. We cannot let the Lannisters get away with these slights.”

“No,” Robb agreed. “We cannot.” He gazed over his shoulder, eyes flickering first to Jon and then to the nearby tent. “I suggest we take this discussion out of the cold. I assume you have full rein to make decisions on behalf of your family?”

“Most,” Margaery acknowledged and then stepped forward, taking the arm that Robb proffered. “A few may require use of a raven or a swift rider to confirm, but I am sure that we can come to an accord quite easily.” She smiled sweetly up at him.

Robb returned the smile, leading her out of the damp weather.

Jon glanced down at Grey Wind and Ghost who had stayed by his side as the pair passed, several guards from each household trailing behind them. He was quite glad that he managed to influence the negotiations with the Frey’s not to include Robb’s hand in marriage this time.

He winced then, thinking of his own wife, one of Lord Frey’s bastard daughters—albeit one of the prettier ones who’d taken after her mother rather than her father. They’d been wed immediately before the army crossed the Twins under the agreement that, following the war, Jon and Waella would be legitimized and given a hold of their own. Lady Stark had hinted at Moat Cailin during the negotiations, but he doubted she would allow it.

Arya’s hand had also been promised to one of his sons, much to Jon’s disgust. It had always bothered him how Lady Stark had been so willing to promise two of her children to one house. No matter the desperation of the move it had set a dangerous precedent and left little room for other alliances to be made through marriage.

He caught sight of Lady Stark then, staring off after her son, lips set in a tight line, eyebrows creased with worry. She caught him looking after a moment and glared, stalking off after her son.
It took over a moon for them to reach Eastwatch at the pace they took, stopping for several nights at every castle and along the way to hunt and inspect sections of the wall. The trip had been more than worth it for they had found several caches of dragonglass—arrowheads, spearheads, and daggers—along the way. They had also gotten a very clear accounting for how much effort, supplies, and funds would be required to repair each of the castles and man them accurately. The numbers were somewhat close, especially in the most recent of the abandoned castles, to what the Night Watch’s records stated, but in a few they were rather off, especially where some towers were in such disrepair that the number of men that could be garrisoned there at the current time was much less than previously recorded.

Jon had been able to look over the figures and was very glad that his father had insisted on this. It would be both easier and harder to manage by his calculations. The Watch at their low level of numbers and lack of support from the kingdoms would not be able to do this on their own. Perhaps not even with just the North at their side for the North had a lot of other things they needed to do to prepare for the future to survive.

It was refreshing to have data from a source that was well trained and could be considered wholly accurate. He tried not to think of how well this data could serve him in future lives.

The sun was setting when they rode up to the castle and port that made up Eastwatch. It was a glorious display of color that had them pause on a rise a few miles from the castle, Winter swirling in the air high above them. So high she was barely a spec amidst the clouds.

“I can’t remember ever seeing the sea before,” Robb mused beside him. He had though, Jon knew, on trips with their father to visit their bannermen when they were younger. Jon had usually been left behind. “It looks like it goes on forever.”

“Aye,” Jon agreed softly. But it didn’t. Somewhere across the narrow sea was Essos, his Aunt and Uncle, and, perhaps, his half-brother.

“I wonder if Father would let us take a ship to White Harbor.”

“Hope not,” Jon winced, continuing at Robb’s raised brow. “Ghost has never been keen on traveling by boat. I doubt Grey Wind or Storm,” if the wolf returned to their father’s side he thought but didn’t say, “would be much better.”

“I sense a story I don’t want to know,” Robb said as they spurred their horses back on.

“You probably don’t,” he agreed. “I don’t and I was there to clean up the mess.”

The sea was rough when they arrived, a storm was said to be arriving within a day of their arrival. Cotter Pyke met them gruffly, accepting them into the Castle and providing them rooms. Maester Harmune was at his side and went with Pyke and their father to meet privately.

They rested for two days before a raven arrived from Castle Black and with it news that Mance Rayder had agreed to meet with Lord Stark and had decided on a location just over a sennight travel from Eastwatch-by-the-Sea.

Eastwatch hadn’t as much space as Castle Black had to provide them living quarters and Jon and Robb had ended up sharing a room with their father. Luckily it was a room with two good sized windows and plenty of space for Ghost and Grey Wind to curl up.
Winter, however, had found the hearth to be lacking in size for her slowly growing form and had ended up half sleeping on Ghost one night, inciting a minor, playful tussle between the two in the middle of the night that had ended up with Grey Wind jumping upon his human—who was sharing a bed with Jon—seeking refuge and waking everyone up.

The evening before they were due to leave found them packing in preparation for the trip. They would be leaving a few things behind as they had plans to return following the meet.

“Father,” Jon started as he folded his clothes, freshly laundered, to pack away. “I believe that Robb is unhappy with being left behind.”

Ned sighed, pausing to look over at him. “I have spoken to him regarding the decision. He understands why I cannot take him along with us.”

Of course, Robb understood but it didn’t mean that he wasn’t feeling left out. Much like Jon often had when he was younger. But Lord Stark couldn’t take his heir with him to meet with a long hostile force, no matter that it was for peace talks, as they couldn’t guarantee that other free folk clans wouldn’t take the opportunity to attack the northern lord in retaliation for long-held grudges.

“If something happens to us it will be up to him to continue our work,” Ned said after a moment, voice soft. “The North will be in his hands.”

Jon nodded, and dropped his gaze back to his pack, shoving a pair of tightly folded breaches into its depths. Robb was a capable leader and would be able to handle things should their father pass, but knowing the reasons behind Lord Stark’s decision could not quell every spark of jealousy.

Earlier Jon had found his brother on the docks, staring out at a ship as it drifted away from port, sunlight glittering across the waves. He’d been tossing a handful of pebbles into the sea.

“I won’t even know if you’re alive for weeks,” Robb had said after a long silence as he tossed another pebble, watching it plunk yards out.

Jon held out his hand. “The not knowing is always the hardest,” he acknowledged softly.

“How do you handle it?” Robb asked dropping one of the stones into Jon’s hand.

He held it up to examine, running fingers of the smooth edges. “You have faith. And you focus on the task at hand rather than the unknown.” Jon smiled a bit, tossing the stone a few feet up and catching it again. “You take one day, one moment at a time.”

“I wish I could go with you,” Robb said as he prepared to toss another stone. “I know, I know why I cannot, but I wish I could. And not just because I want to be a part of the talks—but because I want to see the world beyond the wall.” He tilted a sad smile towards Jon as he carefully let the stone go, angling it to allow it to skip across the gentle waves. “I want to see if that wildling girl you talked about is there and see you stammer your way through meeting her.”

“We’ll go north one day,” Jon said, watching the ripples dissipate. “Perhaps Winter will take us.”

They were silent for a while, taking turns skipping rocks across the water until Jon held the last stone, a lumpy pitted mess that wasn’t suited to bouncing across the tension of the water’s surface. He handed it back to his brother who stared at it, turning it over between his fingers.

“Sometimes I wish I wasn’t the heir,” Robb admitted softly.

Jon looked up at him, staring.
“I used to watch you sometimes and wonder what it would be like if I was the bastard,” Robb chuckled dryly. “I was jealous of the freedoms I thought you had.” He shook his head. “That was before I truly understood how things were for you. All I saw was the mountain of Father, Mother, and everyone else’s expectations for me.”

“You were born for this,” Jon said after a while. “You are a good leader. You always have been, for as long as I can remember.”

“I had to be.”

“No,” Jon shook his head, bumping his shoulder against Robb’s. “There are different types of leaders. You may feel like you must lead, but you are good at it. You’re much better at strategy than I ever will be and I’ve had years to practice.”

“A military leader then.”

“Not just that,” Jon shook his head. “You, like father, have seen things I haven’t and you don’t even know the whole of things.”

“I’m scared to know.” Robb stood, fingers wrapped tightly around the rough stone.

“Good,” Jon said looking up at him. “Never lose that fear. I haven’t.”

Robb stared out after the boat which was slowly disappearing over the horizon. Tossing the stone a little into the air, he gripped it once again and, nodding, he drew back and threw it as far and hard as he could.

“If you don’t come back,” Robb said then as they watched the splash and mini tidal waves it made as it crashed into the water. “I’m not sure what I shall do.”

“Father left notes. I did as well,” Jon said softly. “If something happens to us you go on. If possible I will send Winter to you. I know she’ll go if I wish it.”

Robb let out a laugh at that. “And I would spend my days bribing her, wouldn’t I?”

“Probably,” Jon grinned.

“What would I do with a fat dragon that wouldn’t let me ride her?” Robb mused looking down at Jon. “I guess she might protect Winterfell if we proved a suitable food provider.”

“It is her home and she does like you. You and Arya, especially. Sansa and Bran, too, a bit. She adores Rickon.”

“Yes,” Robb acknowledged holding his hand out. “But we’re not the blood of the dragon. We’re just your blood.”

Jon took his hand, allowing his brother to pull him up. “I like to believe that would be enough for her.”

He was brought out of the memory by his father settling a hand on his shoulder. Jon glanced up and smiled at him. “Robb was wondering if we might be traveling to White Harbor when we return.”

“I was considering it,” Ned admitted and glanced down at Ghost as the young direwolf whined a
little. Normally Ghost was near silent. He raised an eyebrow.

“Ghost isn’t too fond of ship travel,” Jon said chuckling a little at the downcast look on his companion’s features. “I’m not sure how he will handle it and he’s been on ships every few lives so he is used to adapting to it quickly. I’m not sure how the other wolves would handle it.”

“I have a feeling Storm will not be enthused,” his father mused, staring off towards the open window. “Wolves aren’t meant for the sea.”

“If he had sea legs I might have traveled more often,” Jon admitted as he closed his pack, lacing it tightly.

“Do you want to?”

“In a few lives,” he looked up, meeting his father’s gaze. “This one . . . here and now? No. I cannot imagine leaving you and Robb . . . the rest of the family.”

“And if telling me had not gone well?”

Jon pulled in a harsh breath and looked away. “I think—I think I may have—I may have gone to Essos,” he said quickly. “My last life was still fresh in my mind when I spoke with you. And I—I died,” he squeezed his eyes shut, “I died in my brother’s arms. He was the last thing I saw.”

“Your brother . . . Aegon?”

Jon nodded, swallowing thickly. “Yes.” His hands tightened in the fabric of the pack. “If you had not reacted well I would have run to find him. I would have gone to him if it was the real Aegon and not a mummer,” he said and stilled when his father wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him close.

Letting go of the back he wrapped his arms around his father’s back, pressing his face against the warm leather of the northern style tunic.

“I’m glad things didn’t turn out that way,” Ned said a few minutes later. “I know that he’s your family. It’s understandable that you would want to know and see him again. But I’m glad that you didn’t feel you had to run away.”

“So am I,” he agreed, trying to ignore the wetness on his cheeks.

“If there was an easy way for us to find him,” Ned continued voice low, “and to tell if the boy is truly your brother . . . would you wish for it?”

“I can tell you where he’s likely to be,” Jon said softly, pulling away. “I can tell you the name of the ship and the crew . . . but for someone other than myself to tell the difference between Aegon and the other boy.” He shook his head. “They are so alike, but in the end so different. I don’t know if others could, the web of lies surrounding him is so thick.”

“Would you wish us to try?”

Jon bit his lip and rubbed his face against his sleeve. “I don’t wish to risk the North for dreams and wishes.”

His father gently squeezed his shoulder, looking him in the eye for a moment longer before nodding and turning back to his own pack.
Jon stared at the boy in front of him, his mind still a rolling mess of confusion. It had been during his last life that he had met Aegon for the first time. His brother had arrived at Dragonstone with Daenerys and her dragons, their combined force rallying many lords behind them. As the King in the North, he had gone to treat with them at their request.

They ended up fighting together and, for the first time, the fight for Dawn hadn’t seemed quite as desperate as before. The Lannisters had fallen at their combined strengths along with the Vale, the Reach, Dorne, and the Stormlands. Then they had turned to the true threat, three dragon riders burning wights to ashes and decimating the Night King’s army.

This, this was not Aegon. Not the Aegon he knew.

This boy had the true backing of the Golden Company—they wanted a Blackfyre on the throne, even if it meant labeling them a Targaryen. And Jon had made the mistake of letting his identity be known. Not his identity of a Stark, but that of Rhaegar’s son.

Now he knew why he hadn’t heard anything of Daenerys in near half a year. She was gone and this boy’s forces had taken her out. They claimed at first to him via Raven that she had refused her nephew’s right and had attacked him, a fact that had shocked Jon and spurred him to go meet with his brother and find out what had caused such a drastic difference from one life to the next when overall Jon hadn’t sought to change much in this life.

That had been a mistake.

And now, chained and beaten, kneeling before the chopping block he knew that those claims had been falsified. If only he had been able to come into contact with Rhaegal or Viserion . . . but no. Drogon was nowhere to be found and the two remaining dragons were chained and guarded heavily much of the time and the boy had been riding Viserion.

This boy did still have dragon blood, enough magic in his blood that the dragons did respond to him—no matter his lineage.

“Any last words?” The executioner asked, a sell-sword Jon didn’t know.

He stared up at the boy who had his brother’s name. “You would kill your only family?”

“I order the death of a man who sought to commit treason and usurp my rights,” the false Aegon answered. For all his calm demeanor Jon wondered if he really wanted to do this and how he let himself be led without question so different from how his brother had interacted with those around himself.

Perhaps he wasn’t behind this and didn’t want to kill Jon, but he was going along with it. Hadn’t even bothered to question the fact that evidence had been presented within a day of Jon’s arrival to show how the “King in the North” was plotting to take the Iron Throne. Jon wasn’t sure if he should or would ever attempt to find out the truth of the matter or even want to bother. This boy was under the thumb of the Golden Company and their manipulations whether he knew it or not.

Not after the visit Jon received in the dungeon last night. If it weren’t for one of the Golden Companies commanders coming to gloat that finally, finally the Targaryen line would be extinguished and the Blackfyre’s would have their day Jon may have doubted. But the man had gloated and ranted at him, stroking his own ego and easily giving in to answer Jon’s questions on
the matter. If it weren't for him Jon might have wasted multiple lives trying to work with this boy and the people playing him like a harp.

“You are surrounded by liars,” Jon said as he turned his head to stare down at the ground. “I wish you luck in the wars to come, cousin.”
Before they had left Eastwatch, Ned had set Robb to taking stock of what the outpost was in need of and how each vessel that belonged to them was faring. In addition to that, he had requested a full auditing of supplies and records, wishing to keep his eldest as busy as possible and get as much done in order to know how best to provide aid.

The place Mance Rayder and Ser Jory had settled upon was a sennight from Eastwatch, far enough away that reinforcements would be a while coming and that the Stark party would be easily spotted by free folk scouts in the area. The first night they made camp, Storm loped quietly up to the fire, startling a few of the men and acting as if she hadn’t been gone since they’d arrived at Castle Black.

Ghost had greeted his mother enthusiastically, his normal quiet and dignified demeanor disappearing in favor of tumbles and happy whines. After a few minutes of playful tussling with her son, Storm wandered over to the fire and lay next to Ned, her head taking up as much space as Jon did. He watched as his father ran his fingers over her muzzle, caressing the darker grey markings above her eyes.

“Do you think Mance will agree to the terms?” Ned asked quietly a few nights later as they sat before the fire, voice barely carrying to where Jon sat nearby.

Jon tore a piece of dried meat apart and stared at the fire as he offered bits to Winter. Ghost padded over and dropped down in front of him, watching his mother who was tearing into an elk shoulder a ways off. He'd already finished the hare he'd been given. “The terms are all reasonable,” he said after mulling it over, “but still leave room for negotiation on both sides.” He looked up. “Respect will be the hardest part of the equation . . . for the Free Folk titles mean nothing. Respect is earned.”

“They agreed to meet based upon my title.”

“Aye,” Jon nodded. “They know titles matter to us. And Mance was a man of the watch, a southerner to them before he defected. He understands that they will need to work with the system at least somewhat.”

“They respected you,” Ned said thoughtfully a few minutes later.

“And I fought for them. Died for them, sometimes.” He winced shifting a little as Ghost settled down against his feet and shins. “In some lives, I ran away and lived with them as soon as I could. I learned their ways and made it my goal to save as many as I could.” Setting his plate down at his side, he sighed. Winter eyed it with open disappointment as it was empty. Jon spread his fingers wide over his knees. “When they didn’t just kill me I still had to earn their trust and respect. We won’t even have an ounce of that here . . .”

“But?”

“But you and your honor are not . . . unknown . . . beyond the wall,” Jon smiled slightly. “I believe at the very least they will trust you to keep your word.”

A commotion from nearby had them glancing up. One of the men was returning, his clothes soaked halfway up his body, several hares slung over his back. His companion was striding next to him with a makeshift bandage on his arm, a rope slung around his shoulder, a scowl on his face,
and his arms and upper body soaked through.

The group they were traveling with was a dozen strong, plus Jon and his father. All were highly-skilled, trusted guards with experience in the harshest of winter climates. Luca strode up, his face carefully schooled in an attempt not to laugh and relieved them of their catch, directing them to the man who was serving as their healer.

“We should reach the agreed-upon location tomorrow,” Ned said, turning back to the fire. “I want you to stay back with the men at first. And Winter,” he glanced over at the dragon who was dozing with her head in Jon’s lap, “she needs to stay out of sight as well.”

“I figured.” Jon sighed, rubbing her fingers down her spine, causing her tail to curl a bit. “She’s going to spend the day flying and exploring.”

“Will she be able to keep out of sight?”

“I believe so.” Jon worried his lip, meeting his father’s eyes. “They likely already know of her. Don’t lie if they ask.”

Ned frowned and then breathed out a sigh. “Wargs.”

“Aye,” Jon confirmed, raising his eyes to the darkening sky. “They have wargs of various types, but birds of prey are rather common companions.”

“And able to keep track of us from a long ways off.”

Jon nodded as his fingers circled over tiny spines beginning to poke out of Winter’s back.

“It is a handy ability,” Ned said as he burrowed his fingers into the thick fur at the back of Storm’s neck.

Like Robb, their father had been working on the connection he had with Storm since Jon had first broached the subject. Idly, Jon wondered how deep it had grown and if Ned had been watching through her eyes during the time they’d been separated. If he had followed her trek north of the Wall.

“It is,” he agreed. “Perhaps some may be employable in the future.” During whatever wars may arise—Jon was sure some conflict would occur to the south. He hadn’t lived a single life where the Lannisters and Baratheons didn’t resort to some level of battle. “We may be able to locate other families with the ability in the North proper.”

“The stigma against it will make that difficult,” Ned said after a long moment, “but I had thought of that. For the ability to be so strong in your generation . . .”

“With all our southern blood,” Jon put in when his father paused.

Ned nodded, eyes drifting to where Ghost’s foot kicked up a small cloud of dust as he dreamed. “Other families may have retained the abilities or even others,” Jon thought of Jojen Reed’s gifts as his father continued, “and just not have had the opportunity to develop them.”

He bit his lip and turned his gaze to the fire. Bran's gift for warring into Summer had already been strong when they'd left Winterfell for the North. They would have to deal with his other gifts and perhaps where his path in life was to take him soon . . . his abilities couldn't go untrained. Eventually, the Three-Eyed Raven would seek to have the boy journey to him as he had in every life. Even in the lives Bran hadn't fallen.
Resisting the call had never worked out well for the young boy or for the North as a whole.

Jon sighed and ran a hand through his curls, startling when Winter tried to climb fully into his lap. She really was getting too big to be held like this. Her head bumped his chin as she let out a chuffing-purr, and he smiled down at her. Ghost tilted his head back, looking at them upside down. He had time to figure it out later and people who could help him with the logistics of it all.

And, if the Three-Eyed Raven was patient enough, perhaps Jon could fly his brother to the man rather than rely on the Reed children and Hodor to get him there.

The sun was high when they crested the top of the ridge leading down to the valley where they were to meet the free folk party. There were a couple dozen tents set up, varying in size near a stream that bent its way down the middle of the valley, water moving fast enough that it wasn’t frozen over. Most of the tents were rough made, belonging to the various clans. Two were the sturdy type made in Winterfell—large ones designed to hold eight apiece.

Jon brought his horse to a stop, eying the surrounding area and camp below. Ghost nudged his foot with his muzzle before striding forward. His friend was right. It was too late to go back now; they would have to trust that the Free Folk honored the truce.

He urged his horse forward again, allowing those behind him to follow suit. They had to go the long way around the valley, the only safe route for their horses to gain access. As they drew closer Jon realized that every man and woman he caught sight of was of fighting age—spearmen and spearwives. The clans were not taking any risks with this meeting.

Distantly he felt something drop inside his heart. He knew it had been a long shot, but he had hoped to see Ygritte again, even if from a distance; to know that she was safe and alive in this life. But many of the men and women he’d lived beside had not been leaders until more recent times. The White Walkers and their wights had decimated clans in the years leading up to the Free Folk marching onto the wall. He wasn’t even sure of Tormund’s status among the clans at this point in time.

Several Free Folk met them a few minutes from camp along with Uncle Benjen and Ser Jory. Jon didn’t recognize any of them, but he was still a ways away from them, stopped a few horse lengths back from where his father brought his horse to a stand.

“Lord Stark.” Ser Jory was the only one to approach. He was unarmed, but still wore his Stark Armor and the set of furs he’d set out with on the trek.

In comparison, the wildlings wore their own armor and hides but also had spears, axes, and daggers at their side. Only one had a sword dangling at a man’s hip. They were close enough to hear the conversation, but far enough away that they were not an immediate threat.

That wasn’t to say they weren’t threatened. Jon knew without a shadow of doubt that they were surrounded by Free Folk scouts—had been for hours.

“Ser Jory,” Ned acknowledged him, his face stoic. “How are the men faring?”

“Well,” Jory glanced at Jon for a moment before turning back to his liege. “Only a couple of scuffles have occurred between our men and the wildlings. Nothing worse than bruised bodies and egos to show for it, luckily. The fights have been broken up quickly each time.”
“Good.” Ned nodded, adjusting his grip on his reins. “And you’ve all been treated well?” he asked after a pause.

“Well,” Ser Jory grinned, “I would say we have been hostages, but they’ve treated us well. Akin to Theon.”

The wildling man, Jon thought his name might be Ordis, but he wasn’t sure, eyed him, blue eyes following his every movement. The man had striking gold-blonde hair and a reddish tint to his beard, but Jon was too busy trying to keep his mind from wandering with a haze of pain and Ghost’s anger swirling in the back of his mind.

They had picked him up a two-day walk from the Fist of the First Men, traveling in a vague north-east direction. He’d been shot with one arrow, a bolt to his leg aimed to cripple him and allow his capture.

It had been Ygritte who shot him.

“I’m not a crow,” Jon said, yet again, voice calm and dispassionate.

“Maybe not,” the wildling man said, tearing into a piece of dried meat, baring his white crooked teeth, “but you’re not Free Folk either.”

“Not with those fancy clothes and that horse ya had,” Ygritte put in, stalking back into camp. One of their men was trailing behind her, leading Jon’s horse by its reins. They’d had to go chasing after it after startling it when they ambushed him.

Jon stared up at her from behind dark curls as she crossed to him. It had only been their connection in previous lives that had kept Ghost from attacking her. Jon had barely been able to make the direwolf take off into the hills before its life was truly in danger.

“You’re a southroner for sure.” Ygritte knelt next to him, face suddenly very close to his own. Jon jerked back, gritting his teeth at the sudden pain from the cascade of muscles shifting away from her. She ‘tsked’ at him and pulled away the furs they’d dumped on his lap earlier to bare the injury to her eyes.

He blushed scarlet, glancing away. They hadn’t spared him much modesty in the process of getting to the wound to treat it.

Ygritte prodded at the bandage for a moment before pulling it away and baring the wound. She was an excellent shot, having missed his artery, but it had pierced his muscles in a way that made it intensely painful.

“I’m from the North,” Jon insisted stubbornly, jaw clenching tightly as he tried to shift away from her.

“You’re from south of the Wall. That makes you a southroner,” Ordis said.

“May have to use a hot dagger,” Ygritte called over to Ordis over her shoulder. “The bleedin’s almost stopped, but could be better.”
Jon winced at the comment, unsure if it would work well on his skin in this life. It was a noticeable downside when he was injured during the lives he was fireproof.

“He’s your prisoner,” Ordis told her; he had wanted to kill Jon outright. “Do what ya will.”

Ygritte ‘hmmed’ and slipped the bandage back over the wound, tugging it tight and causing him to let out a sharp hiss. When he opened his eyes a moment later she was peering at him, blue-grey eyes narrowed. “What are ya doin’ all the way up here, boy?”

He met her gaze for a long moment. “I’ve got nowhere else to go,” he said finally and then let his eyes drift over her shoulder into the darkness. “I was to take the black but . . . it’s not what I want out of this life,” Jon continued honestly. “I figured one of us, at least, should be happy.”

She frowned, eyes shifting to follow his gaze and then froze.

“You have a companion out here, boy?” Ordis asked, standing.

Jon turned back to stare across the fire at him. “Just one,” he admitted, hoping he wasn’t making a mistake, but his hand had been forced on this.

“He won’t hurt you,” he said softly, attention shifting back to Ygritte.

She was still staring into the darkness, eyes locked on red eyes that gleamed in the dim firelight. Her hands were still upon his thigh, above his wound. Her grip tightened slightly. He winced as pain sparked out from the wound.

“His name is Ghost,” Jon said as the direwolf padded slowly into sight. “He’s my companion. My partner.”
Mid-Summer Part X

Lord Stark dismounted, handing his reins up to Jon who had paced his horse forward at his father’s direction. A moment later he handed Jon his sword and dagger, barely hesitating. Ghost brushed against him and Storm paced up, coming to a stop at his side. Jon stared down at the two wolves as his father turned away, walking a bit to stand with Ser Jory and Benjen just out of earshot.

Storm had followed her human and paused a few feet from the group, eyes locking with Benjen’s wolf, Midnight. He watched as they greeted each other hesitantly at first before brushing their heads together, seemingly recognizing each other.

A hawk screeched overhead and Jon squinted up at the blue sky, wondering if it belonged to any of the wargs he had met before. If it even belonged to a warg. He’d known many, although there was always a core few that showed up in Mance’s main force or that worked with Ygritte or Tormund.

Jon took a deep breath of the brisk air, enjoying the dryer quality it had in comparison to the air at Castle Black even though the cold bit deeper at his skin and lungs here.

“Jon, Luca,” Ned said as he strode back to them. “They will let you keep your arms and make camp here. I bid you to wait until dark before getting too settled. I hope to come to enough an understanding we will be able to join the camp proper along with the rest of our men before then.”

“Yes, my lord,” Luca acknowledged the request as Ned turned his focus fully onto Jon.

“Storm will be staying here with you and Ghost for now.”

“Father—” Jon’s brows lifted in surprise.

“She’s a weapon,” Ned said, stopping him before he could reason out a protest. “She’s also still wild for all that she is bonded to me.” He shook his head, hand settling on Jon’s knee. “She’s a weapon I can barely control and I cannot bring her into a meeting where tempers may flare with nerves as they are.”

Jon shut his mouth, bit his cheek, and nodded.

“You remember what we discussed?” Ned asked, fingers tightening on his knee.

Jon nodded. He did, not that he planned to listen to the commands his father had drilled into him over the past few nights. “It will not come to that.”

Ned smiled, ducking his chin a little and loosened his grip, patting gently once, twice and then dropping his arm to his side. “I will see you this evening. Make sure the men stay calm.”

“I will, my lord,” Jon said and watched as his father turned and followed the free folk warriors into the camp, Uncle Benjen and Ser Jory at his side. Midnight also stayed behind, staring after them for a few minutes before trotting off into the countryside.

One of the men had started a fire going, the process taking much longer than it should have, leaving the man cursing a storm under his breath. Ghost had sat watching him, ears quivering at the
curses as the man glanced forlornly occasionally to the sky. Winter had spoiled everyone where fire was concerned; always happy to flex her growing prowess at breathing light and warmth for everyone—especially when a treat was generally promised to her should she do so without burning anyone or anything that shouldn’t catch fire.

Jon smiled a little to himself as he watched, carefully rubbing his horse and then his father’s horse down, checking for any signs of injury or lameness. It was heartening, the fact that so many Stark men—many of whom had fought in the rebellion—seemed to accept him so readily. And Jon knew they had to have guessed by now, at least most of them, that he carried Targaryen lineage and what that meant. But as of yet no one had insulted him or looked down on him for it.

If anything, he had been treated better since Winter’s existence had become a widely known secret among the loyal ranks. Many had even taken to tagging ‘Lord’ to the front of his name, giving him nearly the same courtesy afforded to Robb, Bran, and Rickon when they were addressed. Before it would have been a mockery, but now he could sense the respect and it shocked him every time he heard it.

Storm was settled nearby, ears quirking as she listened to the men moving around her. The direwolf’s gaze hadn’t wavered from where it was set, firmly in the direction of the free folk tents; her chin rested resolutely on her paws.

Ghost seemed to grow bored after the man had finally caught the fire ablaze and settled near his mother. He was working his way through an elk bone one of the men had tossed him from a catch they’d carried with them from the previous day’s hunt.

When the sun began to near the tips of the far-off peaks, still an hour or so from sundown, Lord Stark and Ser Jory finally returned. Jon and Luca met him a few paces from their temporary camp.

“We’ve managed to reach a tentative agreement,” Lord Stark announced looking between them. “Mance Raydar is to speak with all of the assembled clan representatives this evening and we will continue the talks tomorrow.”

Jon couldn’t help the small grin that grew on his face. Something was going right. He only hoped it wouldn’t all fall apart as things were so apt to do.

His father had seemed to relax a bit as he continued, focusing on Ser Jory and Luca. “Arrange the men, we will be moving to join the rest of our men on the south side of the camp.”

“Yes, Lord Stark,” Luca said, Ser Jory also acknowledging the order.

As the pair moved off, Ned sighed and turned back to his son. “They are aware of Winter. Mance and his men wish to see her.”

Jon tensed, lips tightening into a firm line. “She won’t follow them. Not the wargs. No one but me.” And maybe Robb if she followed his last wish as Ghost sometimes did attaching himself to Sansa, Arya, Bran, or even very rarely Sam, Daenerys, or Aegon in Jon’s final moments.

“She won’t follow them. Not the wargs. No one but me.” And maybe Robb if she followed his last wish as Ghost sometimes did attaching himself to Sansa, Arya, Bran, or even very rarely Sam, Daenerys, or Aegon in Jon’s final moments.

“Mance knows,” Ned said firmly. “I made it clear and he, and even some of the clansmen, are aware of the history of dragons.” He sighed roughly. “One flat out asked me where I found a Targaryen woman to steal during the rebellion.”

“Not in that manner, I’m guessing?” Jon asked and for all the worry rushing through his system he couldn’t help but grin a little.

“No,” Ned chuckled. “Not in those words.” He shook his head at the memory of what was no
doubt a crass and disgusting descriptive question. “Mance gave me his word that no one would try and take her from us. That he would make it clear the dragon would be more apt to burn anyone that touched her or you to a crisp.”

Jon smiled, ducking his head a bit, imagining the conversation. “When do they want to see her?”

“In the morning,” Ned said, smiling back tiredly. “I believe he hopes she will help convince the clans that fighting won’t be worth it. Not with so much effort still needed to build up a large enough force to be a true threat to the Wall and the North.”

“I hope we can convince them.” Jon turned to walk beside his father, watching as the men begin to repack what little they had undone. “Running south may seem like a good idea, but it would never work.”

“Desperation leads to taking risks one would not normally take.”

It hadn’t taken long to set up with the aid of the men already in the camp, and a few pointed suggestions by the friendlier free folk who watched them from a short distance away. Most of which were delivered with a crass, harsh tongue and some laughter. Sun had set quickly as they finished setting their tents. Utilizing a torch, they had restarted the fire at their new campsite quickly enabling the men on meal duty to heat up a quick stew.

Winter glided into camp not long after food was dished out, so quiet that she startled Jon when she alighted behind him, stalking forward to breathe a hot breath of air against his ear. He dropped his bowl into the dirt, much to the delight of Ghost.

Sighing, Jon patted her nose gently unable to retain any amount of annoyance at her antics. She was just trying to ease his nerves. A moment later one of the guards held a new bowl out to him and Luca had stridden over, a bowl of medium-rare meat in hand.

“Here,” the man said, holding it out to him from the side opposite to the dragon, “we thought she might be hungry.”

“Thank you.” Jon took the bowl of stew with his left and the scraps with the right. “She is,” he affirmed and received a nod from both men before they turned away to go back to their own food.

Setting the bowl in front of the dragon he watched as she barely waited for it to touch the dirt before digging into the meal. He knew she had caught a bird or two, small songbirds, during her flight today, but she was growing so fast.

Ghost watched her with mild jealousy. He had already had his own meal and half a bowl of stew as well now, so Jon didn’t feel any sympathy for the wolf.

“Jon.”

He glanced up at his uncle’s voice and grinned, eyes watching as the man strode up to settle beside him.

“Uncle Benjen,” Jon acknowledged his presence with a nod.

“Winter seems bigger than when I last saw her,” Benjen mused, eying the dragon as he adjusted his
body into a comfortable position.

Jon nodded, glancing down at her. “She has grown . . . the daily flights have been good for her, I think.” She slit her eyes towards them as she gulped down another slice of meat. “She’s a long way from full-grown though.”

“I should hope.” Benjen held a hand out for Ghost to inspect as the direwolf sought attention. “He’s grown as well.”

“Smaller still than Grey Wind,” Jon said. He glanced about, peering into the darkness. “Where is Midnight?”

“Hunting, I believe,” Benjen said and then waved off the offer of a bowl of stew from one of the men. “Where’s your father?”

“Resting.” Jon glanced towards the tent he was to share with his father. “Or planning. I could tell he wanted some time to himself.” He paused to take a bite of stew. “Storm is with him.”

Benjen glanced towards the tent. “Since Midnight found me on that ranging he hasn’t left my side for more than a night or two.” He ran his hand over Ghost’s head, scratching gently behind his ears. “His presence fills a hole I never knew I had. I had no idea I had been missing something so . . .” he paused searching for words, “. . . so integral to my being.”

Jon watched as ghost’s eyes slid shut, enjoying the attention. He looked down at Winter, understanding exactly what his uncle was saying. “Neither did I.”
The morning sun came too quickly; Jon was barely able to get a couple of solid hours of sleep before his father gently shook his shoulder and called his name. The tent had multiple lanterns already lit, hanging at the four corners. It wasn’t a large tent, but they could stand within it and it took a half dozen long strides to cross.

Jon forced himself out of the pile of furs, allowing Ghost and Winter to adjust, curling up together in the warm spot he’d left. There was a bowl of cool water and another of snow set near the entrance to the tent. He used a rag to do a basic cleansing of his body and a handful of snow pressed against his eyes to wake himself.

“You have to come along, you know,” he muttered to the pair laying across his abandoned bed as he dressed, lacing his tunic slowly. “At the very least you do, Winter.” She didn’t even slit open an eye.

Ghost ignored him as well and he sighed before stepping over Storm’s tail to retrieve his boots and exit the tent. The mother wolf was inured to the presence of people for the most part, although outside of the Stark family she could often be found growling softly when forced to interact with humans. He slipped his feet into the boots before exiting, intending to lace them tight once he was seated outside.

The sky was more blue than grey when he settled down near the fire, pulling his cloak around his shoulders and hunkering his chin into the fur. The camp was awakening, the night shift of Stark guards heading to bed while the morning shift ate and readied themselves for the day.

As he secured the furs at his front with a simple clasp he glanced up at the panorama, the Free Folk wandering along the edge of the Stark portion of the camp, the light smattering of fog towards the hills. Above them, the sky was clear but for a few wisps of puffy white clouds. The sun was peeking over the edge of the nearby hills warming the crisp air slowly.

Once he had finished tying his cloak he stood and crossed to where one of the men was serving a light breakfast of rye bread, a bit dry and stale but lacking mold, and a greasy, gamey slice of meat from some sort of bird. He ate quickly, ignoring the queasy feeling churning at the bottom of his stomach.

When he returned to the tent a short while later, his father was reviewing official documents and pages of notes; some of which held Jon’s own penmanship—notes from their discussions of his past lives.

“Are you ready?” Ned asked, looking up from the papers.

“As well as I can be.” Jon ran a hand through his hair, pushing it back from his face, tangling fingers in the curls. Gloves. He needed gloves. He cast his eyes towards his portion of the tent, spotting them.

As he retrieved them he eyed the dragon who was watching him lazily, head nestled on Ghost’s tail.

“Winter,” he called causing her to lift her head up. “C’mon.”

She huffed out a hiss and crawled over Ghost’s prone body—he twitched an ear but otherwise didn’t move—and slowly extricated herself from the bed. It didn’t take long for her to reach his
side. She cocked her head to the side and looked at him expectantly.

“When are we to meet with Mance Rayder?” Jon asked, glancing over at his father.

“Soon,” Ned said, setting the papers down upon his own bed. “Mance should be sending men to retrieve us when they are ready.”

A half-hour later a tall, dark-haired man with scars crisscrossing half his face and a young fair-haired spearwife came for them. The woman’s muddy brown eyes widened when she saw Winter, watching every movement the small dragon made with awe, mouth muttering what Jon thought might be a prayer in a dialect he didn’t know. Her companion, on the other hand, just scowled, cool blue eyes narrowed into slits.

Winter, with a mental nudge from Jon, just ignored them. She took to the sky, becoming a dot against pale blue in the distance.

Instead of being led to Mance’s tent where Ned had treated with the King-Beyond-the-Wall and few clan representatives the evening before, they were led to the other side of camp and marched for a good ten minutes before arriving before the makings of a pyre. Sitting nearby was the large form of a giant, not one that he recognized but he had a familiar look about him, Jon thought he was perhaps related to Mag the Mighty.

As Jon took in the area, the small crowd of clan representatives and Mance himself, he realized his thoughts were correct. They were expecting a show, proof that the dragon was real and would one day be up to the task of destroying wights and protecting the future of their children—and themselves. Blinking in surprise, he recognized one of them. Val was standing off to the side, her blonde hair in its usual braid but dressed in dark furs, unlike the bleached white ones he last saw her in several lives ago.

He took a shaky breath and turned his attention to back the man standing immediately before them as they came to a stop.

Mance was waiting, standing between them and the pyre, his brown hair falling thick around his features with less grey streaking through it then Jon could remember. His brown eyes were looking Jon over, taking stock of the bastard son of Lord Eddard Stark. His clothes were a bit less worn as well, his black cloak darker and the red parts even deeper crimson, almost the color of the rubies the red priestesses coveted.

Lacking the patience for niceties—much of which had already been exchanged last night to some extent—perhaps due to his years with the gruff, plain spoken Free Folk, Mance spoke up as soon as they stopped before him. “This is the boy who has a dragon then.”

“This is my son,” Ned confirmed, “Jon Snow.”

Jon stepped forward, back straight and chin lifted as he met Mance’s eyes. “Aye, I’m the boy who hatched a dragon,” he said.

Mance stared at him for a long moment and then quirked a grin. “No ‘your grace’ or ‘milord’?”

“I heard the Free Folk don’t pay service to southerniceties. But if you insist,” Jon inclined his head, “your grace.”
Mance laughed then, grin widening. “You’re not what I expected, boy.”

“And what did you expect?” Jon asked.

“Perhaps someone more akin to Maester Aemon in looks,” Mance admitted, squaring his shoulders and then narrowed his brown eyes. “I saw you once as a boy, but the looks of a boy can change much as they grow. Your eyes match your . . . uncle’s. They don’t dye your hair, do they?”

“I’m a Stark,” Jon said quickly, a harsh bite to the edges of his words, “by blood. No one dyes my hair.”

“Aye,” Mance trailed his eyes over him again. “Anyone with eyes could see the Stark in you plain as day. The dragon blood is well hidden . . . Not to mention that direwolf you have. Same the rest of the Starks, I hear.”

Jon nodded, wishing for a moment Ghost had come with him. The direwolves had all stayed back at camp with Uncle Benjen though.

“But the Stark part of you isn’t what I’m interested in,” Mance stepped aside, swinging his arm to motion to the pyre. “You’ve a dragon I’ve been told and there’s only one bloodline still alive that I’ve heard of that can control them. I may not be as learned as some, but I know my history. I sat through lectures by Maester Aemon when I was growing up at the Wall.” He met Jon’s eyes again. “So, Jon Targaryen, I’d like to see your dragon.”

He set his jaw straight, forcing it to remain relaxed. “She can’t win a war by herself.”

“This isn’t about winning the war,” Mance admitted, lowering his voice to a low hiss that only Jon and Ned could hear. “It’s about providing hope and something to rally behind. One dragon may not be the weapon that wins it—if we even can—but it’ll give people hope. It may make the clans see the advantage of taking Lord Stark’s offer and traveling peaceably south. Convince me that hope exists.” He glanced towards the other Free Folk, shifting and muttering in the snow. “Convince them.”

There was silence for a long moment as Jon stared at Mance. Mance stared back, not saying a word.

After a long moment, he nodded and looked towards the pyre. The pile of wood seemed to taunt him, the demand being made of him and Winter suddenly seeming quite daunting.

Jon felt a chill run down his spine and glanced up at the sky, eyes searching before he slid them shut, reaching out mentally. Winter may be small, young—just as he was physically—and her breath not nearly as intense as it would one day be, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t put on a show.

He opened his eyes, glancing at each of the clan representatives before speaking. “I ask,” Jon called out, forcing the tone he’d used as Lord Commander and King of the North in previous lives into his words, “one thing. That you remember she is but a babe, just passed seven moons from hatching.” He knelt then, knees settling into the snow.

And then his world shifted.
The cool wind slid over his body and allowed him to drift higher; the freezing temperatures bothered him surprisingly little, his inner warmth keeping all but the outermost layer of scales warm. Banking to the right, he shifted his gaze as he sought and found, with his companion’s assistance, the gathering below.

They were intertwined, blended, human and dragon bound together and making choices as one. Sometimes pushing each other towards better choices, filling in gaps of knowledge and understanding. A third set of eyes watched from the back of their mind, content to be left out of this flying business.

They swooped in close, flapping their wings as necessary to break the course set upon them by the thermals they’d been chasing previously. As they grew closer to the humans below, he could spot more details. It was mere moments before their—his—human body came into view. His head was tilted back, eyes completely white, rolled back into his head. His father was helping his body balance, a hand settled gently between his shoulder—a phantom sensation that he tried to ignore.

Winter let out a screech as they careened around the group, gliding before the Free Folk, circling twice before coming to a stop above his father’s shoulder. Their wings flapped quickly, keeping them hovering in place.

They let the eyes of the Free Folk drink their fill as they stared in turn at Mance Rayder through the distorted vision of the dragon’s eyes. Below the normal human-like vision and color field he could see the heat rising from the man’s skin and cool air swirling around him, the chill of the snow on the ground and the slightly warmer patches of ground peeking through.

After a good moment, he adjusted his wings again and dove in a low swoop, circling the pyre once, twice, three times before pulling up in just the right spot and summoning as much strength as he could before breathing out, spitting flames upon the pile of wood.

Jon took a deep breath, almost gasping as he came back to himself, blinking away the dryness in his eyes. He stared at the sky for a moment as he gathered himself.

Winter was at his side, suitably proud of herself as she watched the blaze.

The Free Folk were talking amongst themselves, pointing and gesturing though he couldn’t parse any individual words. His mind was still a bit muddled, Jon hadn’t warged often with Winter and a dragon was quite a bit different than a direwolf, no matter how similar the warging process itself was. He blinked over his shoulder as his father squeezed his shoulder gently before holding his hand out to help Jon up.

The giant that had been sitting nearby was now much closer, standing and staring at Jon and Winter, he realized a few minutes later; unable to keep from looking up and meeting his eyes. The giant stared at them for a few more moments before speaking in the old tongue. Though he’d known the language in prior lives his mind wasn’t making sense of it at the moment.

“He wants to know how big the dragon’ll get,” the spearwife that had accompanied them said.
“Hard to say,” Jon said, mind cobbling together an answer, “but I’ve heard they used to grow as big as a mammoth. Bigger. Twice or more the size.” He glanced up at the giant, not averting his eyes and watched the emotions shift across his face.

The giant smiled, wide and full of teeth.

Jon smiled back. Hope *was* powerful—even just a smidgeon of it could change the world. Hopefully, it would change this one for the better.
The trip to Last Hearth from East Watch was relatively pleasant; the weather held the entire way there, but for a few cloud bursts that did little more than drizzle on them in the early mornings. Ned was pleased with the way his men treated their new traveling companions. A group of ten Free Folk had joined their party of thirty men. There were six men and four women, the women being rough-spoken, hard-edged spearwives that were as far from the image of a southern lady as Ned thought they could get. He thought it was most likely a conscious decision on Mance's part to prove a point and to start their tentative alliance off with as much blunt honesty as possible.

The Free Folk weren’t known for their diplomacy, but the men and women that traveled with them were the closest people to diplomats Mance Rayder could send with them at the time. They were to travel south to Winterfell with them and, once there, begin a scouting of the lands Ned was offering to them. Most of the lands he’d provided as suggestions were in the Gift and New Gift, but there were also sections of land along the western coast of the North that Ned thought would make good farmland and with a new port being constructed in a bay midway between Sea Dragon Point and the Stony Shore it would also give them access to market and the ability to fish offshore should they choose.

The men and women were all representatives of different clans, and not all of them got along, which made for some interesting arguments across the fire and during the long ride. Ned had tried his best, as had the man Mance had put in charge—a grizzled middle-aged man name Othur, whose hair was more salt and pepper than inky black and whose mud-brown eyes were slanted into a glare more oft than not—but he had his own difficulties calming any disagreements that cropped up.

It was Jon who could settle most of the disagreements with something akin to ease. Not just between the Stark men and the wildlings, but also amongst the wildlings themselves. He spent time with them, talking and even hunting with them on a few occasions. Ned watched and listened, surprised at how easily the cadence of Jon’s voice slipped into the various wildling dialects and adopted the common vocabulary used among the Free Folk, although he shouldn’t have been.

Often, he found himself wavering between proud and sad that his son was able to interact with them and dissolve their disputes so easily. Jon clearly understood them, their way of life, and how difficult transitioning into the rules of the North—even if they were to be exempt from many of them—would be.

Robb didn’t have the experience and was unable to mimic his brother’s ease, but he tried. For once it was Robb following Jon as he spoke and turned acquaintances into friends, copying Jon’s manner and emulating how he spoke with them to the best of his ability. By the third day on the road, he managed to strike up something akin to a friendship with one of the younger men, a warg named Breck who was dark-haired and covered in freckles. Breck was companions with a large frost eagle who whirled overhead and screeched whenever Winter drew near. From what Ned could tell they spent much of their time discussing how Robb could better train his warging abilities.

“How much farther to this castle we’re to stop at?” Othur asked, voice rough, and if Ned hadn’t spent nearly the entire last moon with the man he’d have thought Othur was annoyed. And he may have been, but the tone was his default setting.

“An hour or thereabouts,” Ned answered, glancing over at him.
Othur was decent at riding, but it had been obvious from the start that he hadn’t much experience on a horse. They’d done some trading at East Watch to get enough horses to supply their entire party in addition to the wagon they brought. Pyke had been far from ecstatic when he realized who would be making use of their steeds but had provided them nonetheless. Ned had already sent a letter off to request replacements be sent North by one of the breeders he employed as Lord of Winterfell. They would even be better trained than those they’d taken—ten steeds originally broken in and trained with the intention of supplying Winterfell’s guard and cavalry.

Othur stared up at the sky and scowled. “These Umbers that hold the castle we’re headed to. I’ve heard of them. They have no love for the Free Folk.”

“And the Free Folk have held no love for them, or for the rest of us, for thousands of years as well,” Ned pointed out. “We’ve considered each other enemies for a thousand years and that will not go away overnight, but needs must. We will need each other to get through the long night and defeat the Others. Of that I have no doubt,” Othur dropped his eyes to meet Ned’s gaze, “do you?”

“No,” Othur snorted. “I lost a daughter and two grandchildren to wights eight moons back. They were torn apart afore my eyes by blue-eyed, half-rotted corpses. One of ‘em didn’t have but a strip of meat on its legs, but it walked. We keep torches burning now, day and night. Fire’s the only thing that truly kills ‘em.”

“I hope that we are able to prevent the same from happening to others,” Ned said, lips pressed tightly together.

“That’s why I agreed with Mance to treat with you. As did the other clans. That’s why I sent word for my clan to head south to the wall the day you rode into camp,” Othur turned his gaze forward. “Figured if things fell apart with the whole of Mance’s group, I might yet be able to strike a bargain to save my remaining kin and pass the Wall. Either way, death at the hands of southroner soldiers would be more merciful than that of a wight.”

“I will not allow my bannermen to attack any Free Folk settled in the North who follow the agreement that was made.”

“Allow doesn’t mean you’ll be able to stop ‘em from striking against us should they truly wish to,” Othur said and the point struck true. It was something Ned was worried about. The North was large and if a few well-armed men, either under orders or on their own prerogative, decided to strike against the Free Folk a war could be easily started long before his words could sway the tide toward peace.

But any agreements made he would keep. He, his sons, and his men would all seek justice should anything go awry.

“If they do not follow my commands they will be dealt with,” he said stiffly, a muscle jumping along his jaw. “I will not allow murders to roam free.”

“Our way is the old way.”

Ned glanced aside to find Robb watching them, his son having been following their conversation. He smiled slightly at his son and nodded. “Our way is the old way.” Glancing back at Othur, he continued, “Should a man—or woman—decide to take action against the Free Folk, without provocation, House Stark will provide justice. I promise you that.”
The Free Folk, men and women both, paused their activities to watch as Ned, Benjen, and Ser Jory followed their guides through the camp. Their faces were worn, lines etched into many of them—scars and wrinkles—long before they would people of similar ages below the Wall. Life in the far north was more difficult, food harder to come by at times, with no maesters, and few healers with the knowledge to save lives should accidents occur and infection set in.

The cold was biting and, for all he was used to the cold having lived most of his life in Winterfell and the North, there was an edge to it that was different. More dangerous. These people were survivors who lived directly off the land. There were few keeps north of the Wall and few permanent settlements as most people lived in small bands, clans, that roamed the frozen land. This habit would likely be one of the most difficult to break, for they’d been living in this manner for thousands of years.

If they were to come south of the Wall, however, they would have to make concessions to their current way of life. People, even small folk, held their own land and would not think kindly if a band of wildlings suddenly decided to make camp in their fields and reap their crops for their own benefit. Their way of life was why wilding raiders were so hated in many of the holds closer to the wall. It made it difficult for the few wilding men and women who had wanted to adapt to find someone willing to give them a chance.

They were led to a large tent near the center of camp, big enough for at least a dozen individuals to sit comfortably around a fire at the center, but obviously lived in. A couple of wildlings stood outside. To the right, a young woman with a spear stood, her honey blonde hair in a braid over her shoulder and her grey eyes narrowed as she watched them approach. To the left stood a man, a bit older with dark hair edged with grey. He too was armed, a spear in his grip and what looked to be a short sword belted across the leathers at his middle.

One of their guards, a man named Feryn, strode forward and spoke softly to the woman who nodded and slid through the opening. A moment later she opened the tent door fully and Feryn entered without looking back at them.

Without hesitation, Ned followed him in. The tent was much warmer inside, warmed by a roaring fire at the center. It was mostly empty; a few men sat near the fire and another stood across the fire from the entry.

“Lord Eddard Stark,” the man said not moving from where he was standing, hands in front of him, hovering over the fire as if he was warming them. “It’s been some time since I last saw you.”

Ned frowned mentally, searching his mind for a moment, before remembering where he’d last seen him. Jon had warned him of this and he felt shame that he’d forgotten. “Mance Rayder. It has been some time. You traveled with the late Lord Commander Qorgyle to Winterfell once, if my memory serves.”

“I did,” Mance acknowledged, dropping his hands and moving around the fire. The smoke from the fire, drifting upwards towards an opening in the tent, had distorted his features. He was older now, nearly more grey than brown in his hair. He was wearing leathers, a tunic so dark brown it was almost back, and the thick wool cloak dyed black with bright crimson patches that Jon had described to him was draped over his shoulders.

“You have done quite well for yourself,” Ned said after a moment of silence, “since leaving the watch.”
Mance Rayder raised an eyebrow. "Are you going to try and take my head as a deserter?"

The other men at the fire shifted a bit at that and Ser Jory tensed at Ned’s shoulder.

Ned chose his next words carefully. Yes, Mance had abandoned the watch, but the reason he had done so—at least the reason he clung to—still held with some of the oaths the Watch made. Perhaps the original oath, for with what Jon had told him of the lost history he had gleaned over dozens of lives, the original oath hadn’t been quite as long as the current. Many things had changed as the Watch changed over time, becoming more a penal colony than a true Order. It was unsurprising that the oath the brotherhood swore may have been modified as well.

“You swore to be the shield that guards the realms of men,” Ned said, keeping his eyes locked with Mance’s. “Is that not what you are doing? Protecting men?”

“The crows see the wildlings as the enemy that they protect the realm from.”

“The Night’s Watch have not faced the true enemy in thousands of years, have they?” Ned asked. “But the Free Folk have. You have seen them. Else you would not be organizing the clans to fight their way past the Wall.”

“The true enemy,” Mance murmured. “What do you know?”

“I know the rumors. I know that the Watch has been trying to bury its head in the snow, to hide from the truth of things.” Ned paused for a moment, watching Mance’s features in the dim light. “I know a man named Crastor sacrifices his sons to monsters that walk like men but are not men. Lord Commander Mormont told me himself.” Though Jon told him first.

“The Lord Commander knows and yet does nothing.”

“You were a member of the Watch,” Ned pointed out, ignoring his brother shifting behind him at the disparaging comments to his Order. “Do you think the Watch has gotten better or worse in the years since you left the Wall?”

“If you’re trying to convince me to work with the Watch, to work with you,” Mance started, lips pressing into a line between words, “you’re going about it the wrong way.”

“The Watch is not what it once was, but if you try and force your way through you won’t just be facing the men of the Night’s Watch. You’ll be facing the men of the North. Armies trained to fight where the worse trained man is better equipped than your best,” he said and took a step forward. “I do not want to fight you and your people, but if you force my hand there will be a slaughter.”

Unmoving, Mance eyed him, his brown eyes calculating.

Ned truly didn’t want to have to fight the Free Folk. Not only would it weaken the North, but more death would mean a greater army and an opportune time for the White Walkers to attack. He wanted to get as many people south as possible. The North and the Watch could use the assistance to both man the wall and man the land. Already Ned had set Stark men, as well as his bannermen’s, to assisting with construction and farming operations throughout the North, but they were also provided with organized arms training as well. Protecting the people was just as important as feeding them. If the White Walkers—or wars started in the South—threatened them all the food in the world would mean nothing if the people were dead.

“You threatenin’ us?” One of the men around the fire stood, unable to keep his mouth shut.

Mance glanced over at him but said nothing.
“No,” Ned stated simply, meeting the man’s heated gaze. “I am merely stating the truth.”

“Aye,” Mance agreed, nodding to the man and holding up a hand. “You have not seen the Stark men or the other armies of the North before, Braig. I rode to Winterfell once and have seen other holds as well. I was there during peacetime and yet they kept a standing guard that trained daily. His men are well trained and if he so ordered they’d mow down most of the camp before we took them out. A few dozen men would have better arms and armor than a one in a thousand of us. They fight wars with thousands of men in such gear. They have stockpiles of it.”

The man frowned and glared at Ned, blue eyes pinching in a freckled face.

“I came to negotiate, not threaten.”

“Negotiate.” Mance lip quirked in a half-smile. “What reason would you have to allow wildlings past the wall and into your kingdom?”

“Plenty,” Ned answered, turning back to Mance. “I would tell you of them if you are willing to listen.”

“We won’t kneel,” the red-haired man spit out.

“And I will not ask you to.”

That got a reaction from every man in the room. The red-haired man snorted and scowled in disbelief. The other men glanced his way for the first time.

Mance raised an eyebrow and then nodded. “I’ll hear your reasons and your terms,” he said finally. “If you mean to use us for fodder in your wars, though, we’ll not have it.”

“The White Walkers are the ones that want to use the Free Folk as fodder. I want the Free Folk and the North to survive,” he set his face in a grim mask. “I wish to fight for the living, all the living. Do you and yours?”
Storm huffed nearby a short time later, bringing Ned out of the spiral of thoughts rushing through his mind. Plan upon plan, contingency upon contingency. As a boy, he never thought that this would be his duty. As a second son, he’d thought, especially upon fostering in the Vale with Jon Arryn, that he might become a knight and later perhaps a Master of Arms in either his elder brother’s hold or at Storm’s End when Robert became Lord. Or a half dozen other options he’d been afforded. He hadn’t been taught to be Warden of the North, Lord of Winterfell. Those titles had always been destined for Brandon. Lord Rickard hadn’t thought to spend much time working with Ned—or Benjen—to prepare him for the worst should it happen.

That was why he had decided upon hearing of Robb’s birth that while he may be the heir all his male children would receive much the same teachings. Each would receive at least basic instruction in becoming Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North and what it entailed. Even Jon, his supposed bastard. Catelyn had not been happy, but his desperate, harsh words had swayed her to do nothing more than frown as Jon followed at Robb’s heels to learn at his side for years. Her frowns had turned to words once Bran had been born and eventually Jon had been left out of certain lessons.

Hearing what became of his nephew in most lives, how unprepared he was in the first few for being Lord Commander and later King, Ned wished desperately that he would have set his foot down harder. Or that he would have told Catelyn the truth sooner.

He glanced at Storm, who looked back at him as she trotted alongside his horse. The trees were getting a bit sparser now and ahead they could see where the tree line ended. A few minutes later they exited the forest and caught sight of Last Hearth in the distance. The land around them was freshly cleared, stumps still scattered about the fields nearby. Several teams of men and horses were working to get rid of them and other obstructions.

Ahead Ned could see the foundation being laid for the wall he’d discussed with Lord Umber—and similar projects with a dozen other Lords— when the man had come to visit not long after Lord Manderly had departed Winterfell to survey sites they had chosen on the western coast.

While it wouldn’t be much of a deterrent against the armies of men, the thick stone wall, with watchtowers and a few gates spaced at major thoroughfares for the small folk, would add an extra line of defense around Last hearth, some of its fields, and the village outside the castle walls. The trench that would be set before it was of Jon’s designing, something they used in previous lives. It would be worthless without Alchemists, of course, but they would sort that end out if the need arose.

Lord Umber had grumbled about the project and the expense but hadn’t questioned the reasoning behind it. Ned had promised to tell him and the other lords of it with time, reminding them of their oath to House Stark and volunteering assistance with the construction. Money had been less an issue then he’d expected for many as Northern houses tended to be more frugal with their funds. Winters were harsher in the North and full coffers could allow the purchase of much-needed supplies when winters lasted longer than expected.

As they passed the workers, men stopped to stare at them and wave in greeting at the sight of the Stark banners cutting through the air. He’d ordered them to be visible since leaving the Wall, not wanting the sight of free folk traveling with them to cause scouts and small folk to run off and rally men for an assault. It was unlikely that they would have been mistaken for wilding raiders, but Ned wasn’t willing to risk anything. If he could avoid any amount of trouble he would.
But there were some things that he had to deal with. The deep dislike for wildlings fostered by thousands of years of raids was something that he couldn’t avoid. Better to meet it head on. If he could get the major lords to bend on this issue then others would follow, grumbling all the way but they would follow.

Like Winterfell, Last Hearth had been built with keeping the Long Night at bay in mind. It was thousands of years old and had gone through multiple rebuilds after being damaged and partly destroyed over the years. It was designed to last against a long siege, but it had been a long time since such a thing was necessary.

“Othur,” Ned said as they grew closer to the castle, “while not something I wish to ask of you, I find I must request that you join the other free folk while I and my sons meet first with Lord Umber.”

Othur snorted and glanced his way, hands gripping his reins tighter. “Stark, I have no wish to attempt to blunder my way through your *southern niceties*. I’m not here for that shit. I’ll join the others in the back gladly and let you deal with the Umber men.” He grinned wickedly. “I do plan on being close enough to see his face when you tell him to invite us in, though.”

“Thank you, Othur,” Ned said and sighed after the man turned his horseback. A moment later Jon’s horse drew up in his place. He hadn’t seen the teenager since breakfast that morning. “Jon,” he nodded in greeting. “Where’s Winter?”

“She caught a hare a bit before we left the forest and went to find somewhere to enjoy it,” Jon said with a shrug. “Ghost and Grey Wind were acting like they wanted her to share.”

Said direwolves had found their way to the front of the group, loping side by side a few yards ahead of their mother. Ned watched as they nipped playfully at each other as they ran for a moment.

“Do you want me to stay back with the men?” Jon asked hesitantly.

“Jon shouldn’t have to do that, Father,” Robb spoke up from his other side, a frown on his face. The last time he’d taken both boys to meet with a bannerman—to Castle Cerwyn—Jon had stood beside Ser Jory and some of the other men and hadn’t even been introduced as Ned’s son until much later. His lady wife had been with them on that trip along with Sansa.

“No,” he said, not even looking towards his heir. “You will ride in with Robb and me. If there are any objections or perceived slights to be had I will deal with them. Keep Ghost and Grey Wind back, at your sides at the very least, when we reach the gates. I don’t wish there to be any trouble over their presence,” he looked down at the wolf at his side, “or Storm’s. But Lord Umber and his men will not be accustomed to their presence.”

He glanced at Robb, watching as the young man nodded and sat up straighter in his saddle. After several long moments of his son wearing an intense look of concentration, Grey Wind broke from his brother’s side and dropped back to match Robb’s horse in pace. A moment later Ghost followed suit, moving to Jon’s side.

With the exception of two children, a boy and a girl, that Greatjon had fostered to other houses his entire family was present when Ned’s horse entered the gates, Robb and Jon behind him. The man had four sons and three daughters so far, his wife was about Catelyn’s age, so there was no ruling out the possibility of more children in the future—especially considering how fruitful their marriage had been so far.
Greatjon Umber smiled in welcome as Ned’s arrival was officially announced. “Lord Eddard Stark,” he said, bowing, “I welcome you to Last Hearth.”

“Lord Umber, I thank you for your hospitality,” Ned smiled in return. “My eldest son and heir, Robb, has joined us. As has my son Jon Snow.”

The Greatjon’s eyes flickered to Ned’s right, gaze finding each of the boys. It seemed to linger on Jon and, with the minute emotions shifting the man’s features, he wondered what rumors the man had heard.

“House Stark is always welcome here,” Greatjon said finally.

“I am glad to hear it,” Ned said as he dismounted. Striding forward he gripped Greatjon’s arm in greeting, smiling at the tight grip of the man before him.

Lord Umber was a large man, towering over Ned, and having seen him in battle Ned had no inclination to pick a fight with the man. The sword Greatjon wielded and it made Ice look like naught but a bastard sword.

“I trust you heard that I rode north to survey the Wall?”

“Aye,” Lord Umber nodded brusquely, “I heard.” The skin around his eyes and mouth tightened. “There are a lot of rumors floating around, my Lord. Rumors that range from believable to downright mad.”

“I have come to clear such rumors up for you, Lord Umber. And to answer any questions you still have following our last talk,” Ned said honestly, glancing back towards where his men and the free folk were trailing through the gates. “I find, my friend, that while I trust you and yours with my life and that of my sons I must ask for guest rights. I had other reasons then just the Nights Watch to go north and I plan to share them with you, but I must ensure the safety of my traveling companions within these walls.”

Greatjon glanced over the men, his eyes quickly finding the wildlings. “You brought wildings into my lands?” he asked, voice taught.

“Remember what we spoke of previously, Lord Umber,” Ned said, face falling into a blank mask. “I advised you that with the coming winter there would be dangers one dare not imagine and you said you trusted that I spoke the truth of it. Do you trust me now?”

A low growl reminded both Ned and the Greatjon of Storm’s presence at Ned’s elbow.

Greatjon glanced at the direwolf, his scowl lessening in intensity. “Aye. I’ll allow them bread and salt, but if they turn on my people I will have their heads, my lord. And you’ll not stand in my way.”

“Queenscrown. You'll give the wildlings Queenscrown?!” Greatjon slammed his hand down on the table between them, eyes dark.

They were speaking privately in what amounted to Greatjon’s solar. A meal was set between them, cracked bread and a stew of carrots, potatoes, and mutton. After arranging quarters Ned had joined Lord Umber for a private lunch. Later today there would be a feast in Last Hearth’s great hall, Ned
was sure, but first, he had to settle his bannerman’s hot head.

“No, I will give Queenscrown to one of my sons or a loyal lord who will keep the peace between the wildlings, the nearby lords and ladies, and the smallfolk,” Ned answered calmly, staring straight into the blustering man’s eyes. “Winter is coming, Jon, and I’m not just referring to my House’s words or to the season.”

Greatjon’s eyes narrowed and he grit his teeth, fingers flexing on the table but he didn’t move or speak.

“Things are stirring in the far north and I am not speaking of the wildlings, although they too are on the move. They, like we must, are reacting to much darker forces,” Ned leaned forward slightly. “They are scared and see getting past the wall as their only chance to survive.”

“You can’t run from snow and ice,” Greatjon said, but there was an edge to his voice that made Ned think perhaps he was understanding what Ned was getting at.

“No, you cannot and why would they?” he asked breaking a piece of bread off and dipping it into the stew. As he let the juices soak into the crust he continued, not allowing the other man to answer, “They’ve lived beyond the wall for thousands of years and weather higher snows and colder temperatures than the North has ever seen. Yet they are desperate. Dozens of clans are banding together behind a man that once swore an oath to the Night’s Watch. They see him and forcing their way south as their only option for survival. What do you think would have all of them running scared? All of them.”

The man before him said nothing, settling back into his chair. “How many men will we be facing?”

“It won’t be a fight of men, Jon,” Ned said, grey eyes so dark they were almost black. His voice was devoid of emotion. “As to numbers, that depends on how many we can get south of the wall. You told me that you trusted my word last time we spoke and, while I did not outright state it, I had assumed you’d come to the correct conclusion.”

"Aye, I trust you, my Lord, but still it is difficult to believe. You speak of legends, monsters old women tell stories of to scare babes into behaving as if they’re real and don't bat an eye. I can scarce believe that such horse shit is true. I don't want it to be true.”

“Aye,” he said, nodding. “And by the Gods, I wish I did not believe it myself. But the wildlings have seen it and some among the watch have seen it. Winter is coming, Jon, and we must be prepared. Either we all work together or we will die together. I would rather live to see another summer, wouldn’t you?”

“And if you’re wrong?”

He took a moment to savor the soaked piece of bread before speaking again. “The agreement I made will last through the coming winter. If the clans wish to renegotiate to stay in the North then,” Ned said and picked up his glass, glancing at the contents, “then we will. Most have expressed their wish to go back north of the Wall once the danger abates. I doubt many will change their minds and stay. They aren’t fond of us kneelers and our ways.”

“I don’t like this,” Greatjon said after a few moments, “letting the wildlings onto our lands, and I won’t duck my head and pretend to either.”

“I won’t ask you to,” Ned promised. “All I ask is that your men not attack the Free Folk without
just cause. Treat them as you would any other small folk." He sighed and set the glass of ale on the table. "Documentation of the treaty signed with Mance Rayder will be provided to all lords, ladies, and maesters in the North. They agreed to follow the basic rules of our land, with some exceptions to our traditions."

"You’ve heard of their practice of steal—"

"Aye, I’ve heard of it and they’ve agreed to make it clear no citizens of the North will be forced to join in that tradition. Just like House Umber agreed not to practice the lord’s right."

Greatjon’s face reddened. "We don’t practice that anymore."

Ned just smiled tiredly. "They agreed that it would be practiced only amongst their own, but it is a core tradition that they would not give up. Their version of marriage. But, if one of them steals a northerner in such a manner, without prior permission, the major clan heads have agreed to allow northern justice—our justice—to be had."

"Empty promises."

"I will be the first to raise my men to battle should they break the treaty," Ned said, eyes narrowing. "And if one of my bannermen goes against my word I will have justice just as my House always has. Do not test me too much, Lord Umber, or you will learn the bite of my direwolf’s fangs first hand."

Eyeing him Lord Umber sat back, hand reaching out to grab his ale glass. "They called you the quiet wolf once," he said before taking a long drink. "And it’s always fit, I thought. But now you’re making all sorts of noise, my Lord. Perhaps we’ll have to think of something else to call you." He grinned a bit, narrowing his eyes. "My House swore its fealty to yours. I swore loyalty to you and yours. I’ll uphold both oaths, that I can promise you."

He stared at Ned then, gaze serious. "But I want the information you promised me. I’ve heard the rumors, Lord Stark, and a couple of my scouts swore to me that they saw another creature with your party, an impossible one. I could dismiss the rumors, but I trust my men."

Staring at the lord, Ned pressed his lips together in thought, considering his options. Weighing his words carefully he leaned forward in his seat. "If I told you that Winterfell and the North had the loyalty of a dragon, what would you do?" he asked.

“I’d ask how the bloody hell you managed it!” Greatjon waved his glass, ale sloshing a bit over the rim of the recently filled cup.

Ned grinned and chuckled softly. “After that. What would you do?”

“I wouldn’t tell the bloody Crown if that’s what you’re thinking,” Greatjon narrowed his eyes. “A dragon would make the southerners think twice about insulting or demanding anything of us. They wouldn’t dare raise a fuss with that power at our backs.”

“A full-grown dragon, perhaps,” Ned said, watching him carefully, “but a young one?”

Greatjon pursed his lips. “Your—the boy. Jon Snow. He’s the rider, isn’t he?”

Ned inclined his head in a slight nod.

“You fucker,” Greatjon laughed, and then coughed adding, “my lord. You... He’s hers?”
Ned said nothing, just dipped another piece of bread into his stew as he watched his friend.

“By the Gods!” The man leaned back and laughed. “I don’t know how you did it—the dragon bit not raising your nephew—but you’ve done it. The North will never be forced to bow again, will it?”

Ned had already decided to let Lord Umber think what he would of his motivations, of his plans for Jon and Winter. There was a spark of truth to be had, after all. It was better he, and the other lords, believe there had been a plan in place all along.

“No,” he agreed softly, ”we’ll never be forced to bow again. Not in our lifetimes anyway.”
The feast was in full swing, near a dozen of his bannermen—minor and major Houses of the North—had arrived over the past few days with their taxes and tribute for the last year. Tonight, they were celebrating the end of the year's last major growing season and the planting of colder weather crops. Ned smiled as he watched his eldest daughter bite her lip and dip her head before politely accepting a dance with one of Lord Karstark’s sons. At seven name days, she was still learning the steps, but the boy was not that much older than her so they would fumble through together he was sure.

Ned watched them dance for a few moments before turning his attention back to his lady wife who was smiling as she watched the children as well. Raising an eyebrow, he leaned toward her. “I do hope she does not fancy herself in love with one of the lads at the end of the night.”

“She may,” Catelyn quirked a small grin back at him, leaning close, “but then her eye will wander within a fortnight to one of the dashing young guardsmen, to a visiting knight or nobleman, or to one of the prince’s in the stories she reads and insists Old Nan or Septa Mordane tell her time and again.”

“As long as she doesn’t try and convince me to betroth her at seven,” Ned murmured back, “then all shall be fine.”

Already he was fielding betrothal requests for his eldest children, Robb and Sansa, from various lords and ladies. Most came from within the North itself, but a few polite notions had been sent from as far as the Reach. Ned had responded with polite refusals to all, unwilling to sign away their lives at such an early age. Besides, he would rather get a feel for the man or woman their intended would become before agreeing to anything.

The bard’s song tailed off before twisting into another, slightly more upbeat tune. A few dancers continued to swirl about the floor while others switched partners or returned to their seats. His eye caught on Alys Karstark who had, apparently, managed to convince Jon to take part.

The boy’s cheeks were obviously tinged pink, yet his expression was as sullen as it had been since Ned had returned nearly a fortnight ago from visiting Lord Ryswell, Lady Dustin, and several other Houses of the region at Barrow Hall in Barrowton. It had been a relatively quick visit, all things considered, but he’d still been gone over a moon. Normally Jon’s attitude would perk up considerably within a sennight of his return, but this time something had stilled it.

His lady wife made a small noise in the back of her throat and he glanced her way. Catelyn was staring onto the dance floor, lips pursed and eyes narrowed. Ned didn’t even have to follow her gaze to know who she was watching so intently.

Emotions warred within him, but he couldn’t find it within himself to be truly mad at her. Annoyed and a tad upset, but not angry. It was his lies that colored her opinion of his son—nephew—and any anger directed at her would truly be directed at himself.

“It’s just a dance,” he said, the words leaving his throat before he could stop them. “Just like Sansa’s dance, it means nothing. Lady Alys danced with Robb and a half dozen of the other lads already tonight.” He repeated, “It’s just a dance.”

Catelyn pursed her lips and redirected her gaze at him. He wished for a moment that he could tell her the truth, but the words stuck in his throat as they always did. Fear and self-loathing twisted in
his stomach. He couldn’t bear to bring her into this. There was some amount of safety for her and the children should his lies be found out.

Ned watched as she clenched her jaw and turned her head slightly away, eyes drifting about the crowd, likely searching for one of her other children. Most likely Robb. “You’re right, of course, my Lord, it is just a dance.”

Last Hearth’s great hall was brightly lit with lanterns, candles, and a half dozen very large fireplaces set at even intervals around the perimeter of the hall. Ned and his sons had been afforded a place at the high table, alongside Lord Umber’s family. Greatjon had been informed that they would be visiting on their way back from the Wall before they’d even left Winterfell, although the timing had not been secured until their party had departed Eastwatch. This had afforded plenty of time to prepare for their arrival.

The Umber clan was a bit wilder, their festivities busier and louder than most. Some comparisons, Jon had told him quietly one night on the road, could be made between them and the wildlings they so despised at times. The Greatjon’s boisterous, often crass, speech certainly did hold some similarities to that of Othur’s. One might even draw the conclusion that Othur was a tad politer than Ned’s bannerman at times.

“I have half a mind to offer one of my daughters for marriage to the boy,” the Greatjon said, leaning close to Ned’s ear. The feast had been going on for over two hours now and most everyone either deep in their cups, on the dance floor, or both. “But, I have a feeling that’s not something you’re willing to consider yet.” They were watching where Greatjon’s second daughter, Loerna, was nearly leading Jon through the steps of the current dance. The boy looked just as awkward as at any other feast Ned had seen him at. Apparently, it was one of the things that never changed, no matter how many lives he’d lived. “Not much of a dancer, though better than the last time I saw him, I think. Your sister wasn’t much a fan of dancin’ either if I recall correctly.”

“No,” Ned agreed, “she wasn’t.”

Lyanna hadn’t liked dancing, but she had been quite good at it. She had excelled at most everything she’d put her mind to from riding and swordsmanship to dancing and even embroidery. That didn’t mean she’d liked dancing or embroidery, however, in fact, she had loathed the latter. Much like Arya, she’d avoided it when she could—although Arya’s skill with a needle left much to be desired.

He slid his gaze about the room, eyes finding the nearby table where the Free Folk sat to dine. A few of his men, including Ser Jory and the guardsman who he’d recently assigned to be Jon’s personal guard, Luca, were sitting with them. Some of the Umber men would glance their way on occasion, eyes slanted into glares, frowns upon their faces. Guest rights had been given, however, and everyone on both sides seemed to be honoring them.

Still, it was the first night at Last Hearth with several nights to go before they would continue to Winterfell. Ned made a mental note to request access to a raven so he could send word to Catelyn that they would be would return in about a sennight or so.

“While you are correct that I don’t plan on betrothing any of my children quite yet, I am a bit curious. Which of your daughters did you have in mind?” Ned asked, raising an eyebrow. He wasn’t about to betroth Jon to anyone, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t feign at least a bit of
“Urma is a bit too young for the boy,” Greatjon said thoughtfully, eyes moving back to where Jon was attempting to surreptitiously avoid continuing on with the next dance as the bard’s song ended. “Helda I think would run off if I tried to marry her off at this point. She’s as wild as your sister was. Part of the reason I’ve fostered her off on my cousin. They might make a good pair, though,” he grinned, “If he could tame her.”

“Not Loerna?”

Lord Umber let out a boisterous laugh. “She’d break him I think. He looks like a Stark and he perhaps has the Stark height, somewhat, but the boy has his father’s build, doesn’t he? He looks near a midget next to her!” In truth, she was perhaps eight inches taller than Jon. It was doubtful he’d catch up to her height though in the few years of growing Jon had left to do.

“Aye. He is slighter of build than I or Robb,” Ned said, voice dropping though no one was seated in their immediate vicinity and the noise around them made it impossible to hear what the people at the next table were saying clearly. “Much closer to his father’s blood.”

“No matter how adept he is,” Greatjon started, pulling a pitcher of wine closer so he could refill his glass, “I doubt he’d be able to handle my eldest daughter. ‘Sides she might stab me with my bloody great sword should I try to give her hand away without her permission. She’s been yapping about her choice for betrothal since she was nine name days old. If it weren’t for the boy she has her eye on being shit scared of her I’d have married her off the moment she flowered.”

“Sounds as if she is quite the wild one,” Ned said, watching as the girl dragged his son into another dance.

“Aye,” Umber agreed. “Wild she is! Wild and fierce!” He set his glass down and poured ale into his, the liquid sloshing over the rim. “Dare I say she’d be a better warrior than my sons if she had interest in it. She took the lessons given to all our women but kept to the womanly arts gladly. Thank the Gods.” He hmmed as they watched their children dance together. “They would make quite a striking pair if it weren’t for the height difference. I expect I’ll be fielding twitters from my wife for the next several moons on the subject.”

“He doesn’t bear the Stark name,” Ned pointed out after a few moments.

“Bah,” Greatjon grinned around his cup, “what does it matter if he bears a bastard name? With his blood, any house with sense will be battering you with requests. Especially once the truth gets out along with word of that great beast of his . . . both of them.”

Perhaps he shouldn’t have been surprised at how accepting Lord Umber was of Jon and his true parentage, but he was. Ned was glad the man could see that Jon had no part in the choices his parents had made before his birth and that he had been raised as a Northerner, a Stark. Greatjon hadn’t even mentioned Rhaegar or his House by name no matter how often he alluded to Jon’s sire or his house. Instead, just as Ned had hoped his bannermen would, Greatjon had focused on the simple fact that Lyanna Stark was his mother.

“Are you sure this is wise, Father?” Robb asked quietly, watching as Jon opened the doors that kept the weather out of the Umber’s largest guest room. It had a balcony which, although small,
opened with double doors to a space several feet wide in all directions.

The room they were in was one that had originally been set aside for visiting royalty along with several rooms around it. It had been constructed in the time since House Stark united the North and hundreds of years prior to Torrhen Stark bending the knee to Aegon the conqueror.

“She cannot be kept secret forever,” Ned answered as Winter landed upon the polished stone floor. “Already the smallfolk are talking of her and the rumors we’ve spread will only help masque the reality of her for so long. It is better that we gain as much support as possible from our most trusted bannermen and allies.”

“She still has much growing to do,” Robb said, concern and nerves creasing his brow. “I worry what would happen if the wrong person found out about her. What if someone attempts to steal her?”

“Would Grey Wind accept orders from another person?” he asked, eyes finding the wolves where they had piled up on the bed he would be sleeping upon late tonight.

“Jon or you, perhaps.” Robb sighed. “I just worry about what will happen if another . . . Jon says his uncle is mad. If word reaches him I cannot help but worry about what he may try to do.”

“At this point, the man you speak of has very little support from a few nobles in Essos who seek to use his name to their own gain, no funds to speak of, and only a younger sister who backs him due to the lies he’s fed her,” Jon said, his voice carried over to them as he glanced their way. Winter was eating scraps of dried meat from his hands, body pressed against his shins. “Winter is a part of me. You need not worry about who she would support if I fell.”

“You mentioned a horn once,” Robb pointed out. “One with magical abilities that would enable a person to steal a dragon.”

Ned had forgotten about that story. Euron Greyjoy was a man that had, in several retellings of past lives, made Jon’s body shake with barely suppressed rage at the memories of his deeds.

“Fool me once,” Jon said, his hand running over Winter’s neck, “shame on you. Fool me twice shame on me . . . Fooling me three times with the same trick is extremely difficult. I don’t plan on giving him the chance.”

A knock sounded at the door along with Ser Jory’s voice. Ned paced towards the heavy wooden door. “Yes, Ser Jory?”

“Lord Umber is here to see you, my Lord,” the guardsman said, voice calm and clear.

Ned glanced back at his sons. Robb had moved to stand between Jon, Winter, and the door. His face was set in a solemn mask which made his Stark features more prominent on his face to the point if it weren’t for his red hair and bright blue eyes it may have drowned out the Tully in him. For his part, Jon was adjusting his tunic and jerkin, smoothing out a few wrinkles at the edge of his tunic where Winter had just been tugging in her requests for more food.

Grey Wind and Ghost had both slipped off the bed, he noticed, while Storm had lifted her head, ears perked and eyes staring his way. Grey Wind had moved to stand beside Robb and Ghost sat next to the bed with his ears quirked and attention set on the door.

“He may enter,” Ned said, turning back to the doorway. “Thank you, Ser Jory.”

The door opened and within moments Greatjon Umber had slipped through. Ser Jory closed the
door behind the lord, remaining at his post.

Greatjon greeted him before his eyes cast about the room, taking in the occupants. He found Jon and Winter last as they were partially hidden from his view by Robb.

“By the Gods,” slipped from his lips, followed by a few other curses. He glanced back to Ned. “I know what you said, but still. Some things you damn well have to see yourself.”

Ned nodded in agreement and motioned Jon to step forward as Robb hesitantly stepped aside. His eldest was nervous for his brother, he could tell. This would be the first true northern lord or lady, and the first person outside of the Stark household, guard, and the wildlings, to be shown the truth. When they’d returned to the Wall the entire party, including the wildlings—who had done their best to steer clear of any ‘crows’ other than Benjen anyway—had returned to keeping mum on the subject of the dragon. Robb held the same fear Ned did but lacked the ability to keep it tightly concealed.

“My lord,” Jon said, bowing slightly as he stepped forward to officially greet Lord Umber.

“Ah, none of that shit,” Greatjon waved away the nicety, lips tilting in a half-grin. He stepped closer, surveying the boy. “Now that I know I can certainly see where you take after your mother. A bit less like your . . . uncle than at first glance. Lady Lyanna was a bit darker in coloring, her hair and eyes, and I can see that in you now. Bit of your father, too,” his tone was a bit darker, “but I only saw him once and never up close.” His eyes shifted to Winter who was peering towards him, her wings flaring slightly and mouth open just a tad. She was silent, though, the hissing-growl sound reserved for those she disliked not making an appearance. “Damn gorgeous beast. How old is it?”

“About eight moons,” Jon’s hand curled over the back of her neck, just below her skull. She bumped her head backward slightly, eyes slitting and mouth shutting. “She has a lot of growing to do yet.” He glanced back up at Greatjon. “Her name is Winter.”

Greatjon’s grin widened and he let out a loud, bellowing laugh. “A good name for the first northern dragon!”

Winter quirked her head back towards him, the tops of her wings tilting down. She blinked.

“Aye,” Jon smiled a little, hand dropping to his side when Winter took several steps forward, peering up at the tall lord, “it is.”

“And these direwolves of yours!” Ned watched as Lord Umber’s attention slipped over to Grey Wind where the wolf had paced forward to stand next to Winter, eyes watching the lord’s every movement. “They make me wish my ancestors had chosen a fierce beast for our house sigil! Perhaps I’d have a mountain lion, a bear, or even a damn trickster fox to fight at my side had they done so.” Greatjon turned a wide smile to Ned. “You Starks have all the luck!”

Unable to help smiling back at his bannerman, Ned shrugged. “So it seems,” he agreed. “At least in this. When winter comes, we’ll find out how lucky we truly are. Everyone will.”

The sun rose much earlier than Ned would have liked the morning after the feast. Unused to the position of the window to his bed, he found himself blinking awake as the light slowly crossed the room as it began to rise above the horizon. Dreams of chasing shadows through the forest and
padding quietly across stone floors slipped away as his mind came to full wakefulness. While he hadn’t drunk as much as he might have in Winterfell, a dull throb still pulsed at the back of his skull.

Groaning, he slid from the bed and crossed the way to where a pitcher of water had been set on a small table along with a basin to wash with. After drinking his fill and using the chamber pot, Ned busied himself with getting ready. He found himself having to maneuver around Storm’s large shape where she had splayed herself over a large rug in the center of the room. She barely opened an eye to glance at him as he passed.

He was just adjusting the sleeves of one of the nicer shirts he’d brought with him when a knock sounded at the door.

“Father,” Robb greeted him a moment later after he waved his son inside the room. “Did you sleep well?”

“I did,” Ned said, moving to finish dressing. “How did you and Jon sleep?”

“Well.” Robb bit his cheek as he settled a hand on the back of a chair set next to a writing desk along the wall. “The direwolves went hunting last night,” he said after a moment, eyes locking onto Storm who slit her left eye open to look back at him. “I dreamt it.”

“Aye, they did,” Ned confirmed, glancing up at his son. “Lord Umber made sure all his men were aware not to attack them while they were out.”

“That’s good,” Robb said softly and then glanced over to him. “Did you dream it as well, Father?”

“Yes, I did.”

Sighing, Robb leaned against the desk. “I wish I could control it like Jon. But it seems like all I can do is dream and get the occasional glimpse through his eyes.”

“Jon has had a lot of practice,” he pointed out as he adjusted his gear. “You and I have only had perhaps a year to learn. These things take time.” He crossed the room to set a hand on Robb’s shoulder, squeezing gently. “You’re progressing much quicker than I am,” he professed with a wry grin. “I only share Storm’s eyes in my dreams. You, at least, can get a glimpse when awake with some effort.”

“It just seems impossible,” Robb said, hands clenching.

Ned surveyed his son for a moment. He was doing so well, taking everything that had been thrown his way in stride and moving forward the best he could. It was obvious that Jon’s leaps and bounds in various abilities—from scholarly knowledge to skill with a sword—had worn a bit on Robb who was used to being on par if not slightly ahead of his brother. The skill sets garnered over hundreds of lives, even if some had to be retrained onto a youthful body, making it seem like Robb faced an insurmountable mountain summit to catch up with Jon.

“Did Jon tell you it took him a half dozen lives to realize there was more to his connection with Ghost than the occasional shared feeling and dreams?”

Robb sighed and after a long moment nodded. “Aye, he did.”

“Did he tell you how long he lived in those lives?” Ned asked and then continued without waiting for an answer. “My best estimate put it about thirty years, give or take a few, as at least one of those lives lasted but moons.”
“I don’t have thirty years to grow into my abilities,” Robb said, a muscle jumping along his jaw. “Winter might be over by that time.”

“It won’t take you thirty years,” Ned bumped his son’s chin with his knuckles gently and tilted it up with a finger. “It may take me that long, but not you. You have Jon to teach you. The wildling, Breck, has been working with you. There will be other men and women among the Free Folk that you can speak with for advice as well.”

“What if I’m not ready and things go wrong?”

“No one is ever completely ready for the challenges laid before them,” Ned said and gently cupped Robb’s cheek, patting it gently with his fingertips. “We just do our best. We fight until we can’t and then we keep on fighting for our home, for our family.” He met Robb’s eyes and put as much confidence as he could into his voice. “You will be ready, my son, we will all be as ready.” As ready as they could be with hundreds of years of cumulative knowledge on the possible pathways life would take their family and the world over the next few years.

They had a better shot than any versions of themselves Jon had met before to make it to and through the long night and Ned was going to do his damned best to make sure his children made it through. All of them.
Interlude: Catelyn Part I

The sky had clouded over during the ride, a common sight this far North and one that made Catelyn miss her childhood home of Riverrun. While not hot by any means, the weather south past the neck was much warmer and the foliage a different kind of green. The sky bright blue far more often. She missed the warm summer months she'd spent running about Riverrun with her sister and even little Petyr. She tried to ignore the thought of him now, though.

Catelyn may have lived in the North for over thirteen years now—a few years more and she'll have lived here half her life—but she doubted she would ever get used to the cold. Today, though, she had foregone the thicker furs her husband gifted her. The cloak she wore now was rather thin compared to her usual fare, but it was beautifully embroidered by her own hand.

Nearby her daughter, Sansa, was riding a bay pony and no matter her southern, Tully, coloring her Stark blood was showing through as she had foregone the furs completely. Still, a hooded cloak was stored in one of Sansa's saddlebags should the weather turn.

Two guards followed close by and there were two further back, allowing them the semblance of privacy while making a show of security to deter threats.

"Why are they digging out a trench?" Sansa asked, watching the workers as they slowly rode past them. She glanced at her mother, brow furrowed between her bright blue eyes. Her bright red hair was done back in a simpler, northern fashion today than what she’d been touting recently. Septa Mordane had begun styling her daughter's long locks into the southern styles that had been favored in their youth more and more often. Sansa’s young companions had also begun trying to mimic them as well.

Catelyn smiled at her daughter’s curious expression. “The wall and its towers will need a good foundation. One cannot just build a wall from the soil up. For it to be strong and stand the test of ages a good foundation is paramount.”

“Like Winterfell?”

“Yes,” she nodded, glancing over Sansa’s head towards the high walls and large castle in the distance, “Winterfell is built upon a very strong foundation and upon the catacombs.”

“By Bran the builder,” Sansa said as they passed a cart of building material and another that held provisions for the workers.

“That is what the legends say,” Catelyn acknowledged, “and Winterfell’s foundations have stood the test of time, even when the upper levels of the castle have needed to be rebuilt.”

“Will this wall last a thousand years?” Sansa asked a while later as they passed a group of masons working where the base of a tower was being built.

“I don’t know,” she admitted to her daughter. “If well maintained, with luck, and if no battles are fought before it, then perhaps.”

Building a new wall to surround Winterfell, winter town, and a large chunk of surrounding farmland—even cutting through the Wolfswood—had been a project that Ned initiated just before he left and tasked her to continue during his absence. They had brought in masons and workers from across the North, down through the neck, and even from the Riverlands. Most of the workers were contracted for multiple projects across the North and would likely stay in the region for some
time.

It was not a small task to be sure, but during the moons her lord husband had been away they had gotten a good start on things. The gates and towers in their immediate vicinity had nearly finished construction, the land fully surveyed, and, where need be, leveled and cleared to build the wall itself. Stone was constantly arriving from nearby quarries Ned had ordered into production months before he left.

It had surprised her, how quickly things had gotten underway. Catelyn had known that the North was quite frugal, but she had been surprised of how much was in Winterfell’s true coffers—within the hidden vault in the crypt her Lord husband had recently shown her, her eldest son Robb, and her... nephew Jon.

It wasn’t often that Catelyn found herself within Winterfell’s crypts as usually access was reserved for those with Stark blood, but she was bound by marriage and her children were Starks. They lit candles and laid mementos at the newest crypts—Ned’s brother, parents, grandparents, and his sister—stopping for several minutes at each for Ned to reminisce. The longest pause was at Lyanna Stark’s resting place.

Folding her hands in front of her, gripping the front of her skirt with her fingertips, Catelyn stared at the visage of her good sister. I’m sorry, she thought as she watched Jon light a candle and place it in the open hands of the statue. I am sorry I couldn’t see the child. That I never saw past the lie.

Robb settled a hand on Jon’s shoulder, squeezing gently as Jon looked up at his mother’s statue. The candle illuminated his face and reflected in his dark eyes. For a moment, she almost thought she could see a sheen of dark indigo over the dark grey orbs.

It was easier since she knew the truth, but even now there were times her gut reaction was of anger, distrust, and resentment when she laid eyes on him. It was gone within moments, replaced by a slick, slimy shame that clung to her innards.

“She loved you,” Ned’s voice was a low rumble to Catelyn’s right and she glanced over at him. There was a wetness glimmering at the edge of his eyes she rarely saw. The first time he’d ever cried before her, truly let her in, was when she lost their second child, a year and a few moons before Sansa’s birth. A boy, the Maester had said.

“She would have been proud of you.”

Jon ducked his chin, glancing back at them behind dark curls before turning his head to Robb who slid his arm up to wrap around his cousin’s shoulders.

The pain of the babe’s loss had, perhaps, darkened her opinion of Jon—then a toddler—even more. In some part of her mind, she always thought her lost son would have taken Jon’s place as Robb’s childhood companion. Another boy might have allowed her husband’s bastard to be shunted off, perhaps have enabled her to convince Ned to foster him elsewhere. The loss had brought them closer together, though, through the shared grief.

“How is it possible to miss something you never knew?” Jon’s voice was soft, barely above a whisper.

Catelyn’s heart clenched and a sharp cold like frozen lightning slid through her veins. She pressed
her lips tight and felt moisture prick at her eyes. Jumping a little, she breathed in as a solid weight settled on her shoulder.

Glancing up she met her husband’s grey eyes. His hand slid over her shoulder to the other side and pulled her to his side. Catelyn leaned against him and closed her eyes as he pressed a kiss against the side of her head.

“Because you never knew it,” Robb’s voice carried over to them and just made the pain that much worse. “There was a hole in me before Grey Wind just as you said there was a hole before Ghost and Winter. I think it must be like that only you’re aware of it.”

“Because you witnessed what your . . . siblings have,” Catelyn’s voice was a hoarse, harsh whisper. “Because I couldn’t love you.” She drew away from Ned, stepped towards the boys.

Robb turned and stared at her, eyes wide in the dim light from the candle and torchlight. A second later Jon turned towards her as well, causing Robb’s hand to fall away from his shoulder.

Jon’s eyes darted between her and Ned before settling on her again. “You didn’t know.”

She shook her head and paced towards him, one hand reaching out towards his face as if to cup his cheek. “But I made a promise,” Catelyn said after a long moment as she pressed her fingers to his cheek. “I made an oath once and broke it after . . .” The words choked in her throat.

His hand pressed against the back of hers and she swallowed. “It doesn’t matter,” he said softly, “Aunt Catelyn. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

But it did. It did matter to her.

“We should go,” Ned’s voice was rough and he had cleared his throat before speaking, “We have a lot of walking to do, yet.”

The crypts went deep, and that night they had gone deeper than she had ever dreamed of going. Ned and Jon had held the torches as they passed the resting places of generations of Starks. The farther down they went, the more held not only statues of men, but also statues of direwolves. The wolves stood as stalwart guards at the sides of Kings and the final resting places seemed just a tad wider. As they drew closer to their destination, Ned had started explaining things in a low voice that she nearly had to strain to hear.

At some point, generations upon generations back, a Stark King had made a decision and had bound his children to an oath. The relatively simple style of living of the North, that House Stark ascribed to, wasn’t just a way of life. Although Catelyn knew that the Starks and other Houses put aside part of their coffers for the long months and years of Winter, she had never expected what she had seen.

One might have expected the oath to be broken at some point; that somewhere along the line an heir would have used what was hidden away and lived lavishly, but none had. Perhaps the North wasn’t as rich as the Lannisters, the Tyrells, or half a dozen other southern houses. But they didn’t need gold mines or rich harvests.

Somewhere along the line, a percentage of every year’s taxes and any transaction that passed through Winterfell’s coffers was transferred here. Gold, silver, other precious metals, gemstones . .
everything from raw materials to recently minted gold dragons. All to prepare for an eventuality, a legend.

No Stark had ever broken the oath, splurged on the wealth gathered by generations. And, more importantly, no Stark had ever forgotten. Somehow the vault had always been found and the inscription upon the door—redone in half a dozen dialects over the centuries—had always been followed.

For, as Catelyn has come to know, the North remembered.

Even when they believed the legends long gone; the North remembered.

“My lady,” a cart driver called a greeting as he passed them, his cart filled with gravel.

She nodded back, a smile gracing her lips.

This was not the first time Catelyn had taken a ride to see the progress, usually with Ser Rodrik and Winterfell’s Master Builder Byford at her side. Today both were attending other duties and she had left them to do it, deciding instead to bring her daughter along. Sansa had much to learn and after a discussion with Ned, she had decided to try and pull her daughter’s head from the clouds. To distract her from the dreams of knights and princes and ground her in reality. It scared her to think how unprepared Sansa had been for the harsh life she had been forced into in some of the tales Ned had told her.

“How long will it take before it’s completed?” Sansa asked and Catelyn glanced towards her.

She smiled at her daughter. “Many moons. There are many, many factors that could affect progress, so it is near impossible to give an exact estimate. Master Builder Byford says they are ahead of schedule, but right now the weather is good, we have an abundance of manpower as there is time before the next harvest, and the quarries producing a steady supply. If all goes well perhaps a year or two and the majority will be completed. Maybe less.”

As they rode, inspecting the work that had been completed, she couldn’t help but be astonished. So much progress had been made already, both here and in winter town.

Her eyes landed on the nearby tent city that had arisen, neat rows of hardy tents constructed on her orders to house the workers. A few more permanent buildings had been created as well, a large kitchen to facilitate feeding the men, a tavern operated by a young couple from winter town, and an offshoot of a brothel from the town.

“We should be heading back,” Catelyn pulled on her horse’s reins gently, turning it back towards the road, planning to return through winter town.

Sansa didn’t disagree; her mother had been quite clear that she and the rest of her siblings were to avoid the tent city. While Winterfell and winter town’s guard had a presence, there were many individuals there not beholden to the North. Catelyn had already sentenced two men to the wall due to liberties they had taken with residences of winter town and the tent city. She had the guard actively patrolling the town at all hours for trouble makers. The tent city was harder to regulate.

“How long until Father returns?” Sansa asked a while later as they passed by several buildings being constructed at the edge of winter town. “They’ve been gone so long.”

“Soon, they left Last Hearth under a fortnight ago,” Catelyn said, smiling as several smallfolk greeted them.
“I miss Robb and Jon,” Sansa said, chewing on her lip. “It’s not the same without them or Father.”

Catelyn couldn’t help but agree; there was a marked difference to the castle without their presence and it wasn’t just the lord of the castle being absent and his duties falling to her and Ser Rodrik. It was the man himself, his strong presence and demeanor. She missed him, wholeheartedly missed her husband.

When he left, things between them had just begun to settle back to how they had been prior to his revelation of Jon’s parentage. The thought still sent a tiny cascade of anger through her bones. For so long she had treated the boy as if he was nothing to her. Treated him with indifference at best and did everything she could to shun him.

The anger was always followed by a dark shroud of guilt. Guilt for trying to keep Jon away from his family, for effectively locking him out of events and milestones in his cousin’s lives, for wishing him dead on multiple occasions.

“Shhh,” Catelyn rocked Robb gently, soothing her child with gentle murmurs. He was sniffling against her neck, fingers of one hand tangling in her hair while the other grasped at her shirt, clenching above her breast.

She had awoken a short time ago, perhaps a dream or the shift in temperature in her chamber had driven her from sleep. It was early in the morning, hours before first light, and unable to fall back asleep she had made her way to the nursery to check on her son.

There were several women, a wet-nurse and nursemaids, employed by her lord husband. One of the nursemaids was sitting in a chair near the hearth in the nursery when she arrived, a young northern woman name Della. She’d looked up upon Catelyn’s arrival and stood, smiling tiredly.

“The young Lord has been a bit fussy tonight,” her voice had been soft, almost a whisper. “He just fell asleep a few minutes ago.”

“Thank you, Della,” Catelyn had told her, reaching for her son. “I shall take it from here, for a while. Go take a break for a bit, I don’t plan to head back to bed for some time.”

“Are you sure, my lady?” Della had asked, glancing quickly at the other side of the room.

Catelyn had refused to follow her gaze. “I am sure.”

“When would you like me to return, my lady?”

“Return in an hour and I will give you further instructions then.”

It wasn’t often that Catelyn allowed the nursemaids or Wylla, the bastard’s wet-nurse, to leave her alone with the child. Usually, if she arrived they would remove the babe from her vicinity. While Catelyn would have preferred not to have her child sharing a room or attendants with his base-born sibling, her Lord husband had disagreed with the sentiment, insisting that the child would grow to know his half-sibling and any other children she might bear him.

Sometimes Catelyn wished that she might not bear any further children; in the darker moments when she wasn’t thinking ill of the bastard’s continued existence. If only that would mean that she wouldn’t have to share a bed with her lord husband who had dishonored her again. But she wanted
children, many children, and another, stronger, part of her insisted that more children would secure their birthright over any claim the bastard might attempt. She only wished that the Ned she went to at night was still the picturesque, honorable-in-all-ways man that had smiled shyly at her in the sept moments before they were married. The look and the night they spent together had given her so much hope for the future.

Until he had arrived home with a bastard in tow that he told her, his face a solemn, icy mask, had been born several moons after her own son.

As she rocked Robb, shushing him quietly, a low murmur of noise caught her ear. She clenched her jaw as a burbling cry called out into the room. She ignored it for some time, choosing instead to continue the rocking motion that seemed to keep Robb quieted until her son grew restless from the relatively quiet cries from the basinet against the far wall.

Lips tight, she paced across the room and stared into the crib, eyes finding watery grey orbs staring up at the ceiling. The babe’s cheeks were slightly pink and his head of wispy dark hair thicker than when she had last seen him. He seemed to notice her and quieted, one hand reaching up towards her.

Pressing her lips tightly together, she eyed him before reaching in and touching his cheek for the briefest of moments. The babe was too warm, she could tell even without touching him from the sight of his rosy cheeks. A blanket covered most of his body so she tugged it down to let the cool air reach more of his skin.

Catelyn eyed him for a moment longer before she could not stand to look at him further. Then she turned away, striding back to the other side of the room, to Robb’s side of the room. She ignored the little whimpers from the bastard’s basinet, few though they were, for the rest of the night until the nursemaid returned.
“Mother! Mother!” Bran called out as he ran into the room where she, Sansa, and a disgruntled Arya were bent over fabric, carefully embroidering details into the cloth.

She had dismissed Septa Mordane an hour ago, along with Jeyne Poole and Sansa’s other companions. While she had just meant to keep Arya late as her youngest daughter had disappeared for over half her lessons over the past sennight, Sansa had decided to stay as well.

Summer, his paws still too large for his body skidded into the room behind Bran. Within moments he noticed his sisters and bounded over to them. Glancing their way, she frowned in annoyance at the sight of Nymeria chewing a skein of thread.

“No running,” Sansa scolded before quickly snapping her mouth shut and glancing over at Catelyn.

Eyebrow raised, Catelyn looked pointedly at her son and he bit his lip, feet shuffling in place as he stopped before her. “What have I told you about running in the castle?”

“No,” he mumbled, eyes falling to the ground.

“Will you do it again?”

“No.”

“Bran,” she put force behind her words and he sighed in response.

“I promise I won’t run in the castle again,” he recited and then glanced up at his mother.

She shook her head slightly, sighing, and smiled at him. “Now what has you in such a hurry?” she asked, setting aside the jerkin she was working on.

“A scout has returned!” he exclaimed, features brightening. “Father, Robb, and Jon will be here within an hour!”

Arya perked up in the corner of Catelyn’s vision, chewing on her lip and glancing towards the door. Her needle was haphazardly stabbed through the flower she had been attempting to create out of blue thread.

Catelyn’s youngest daughter was not an expert at the womanly arts, though she was sure it was more due to her dislike of the work and love of all things that a young boy should be doing. Every time she scolded Arya for missing her lessons or running from the Septa or sword fighting with the boys Catelyn felt a tiny bit of guilt spark within her. But it was for Arya’s own good. One day she would marry and become a lady of her own castle; she needed to learn the arts and skills that befit a lady.

“Mother?” Sansa asked, biting her lip as she looked up from her own project. It was an image of all eight direwolves dancing together—she had added the eighth to the image after hearing of her Uncle Benjen’s black direwolf in a letter from Robb while he’d been at Castle Black. A stream ran through the field in the image and Catelyn had caught sight of the trout within it. So far it was beautifully done, each direwolf captured in near-perfect coloring from Jon’s Ghost to Rickon’s dark-colored direwolf.

Catelyn sighed heavily, playing the moment up for her children. “All right,” she said finally. “All
right, you may go.”

A grin blossomed across Arya’s face and she practically tossed her fabric and needle away, standing in an instant.

“After you, both of you, clean up the supplies properly. Everything has its place and I expect everything to be placed away correctly.” Catelyn looked pointedly at Arya at this, whose cheeks reddened a little at the scolding.

“Yes, Mother,” Sansa said, smiling sweetly as she stood and began to clean up after herself.

Out of the corner of her eye, Catelyn saw Arya roll her eyes at her sister, mimicking her words silently. This time she would overlook it, but she would not forget the occurrence.

“Bran,” Catelyn turned back to her son. “Please go let Rickon’s nursemaid know that I shall be up in about half an hour to retrieve him. Go straight there and—”

“And no running!” Bran called as he nodded, backing out of the room. “Yes, Mother!”

Catelyn pursed her lips to hide the grin that wanted to force its way onto her face and shook her head, sighing to herself. She had thought that Robb and Jon had been trouble, but lately it seemed Arya and Bran were ten times the trouble they had ever been.

Perhaps it had something to do with Jon attempting to keep on her good side as much as possible when he was younger.

She pushed the thought away. It wouldn’t do any good to dwell on the past. What-might-have-been would never come to pass—not for her—and she had no need to focus on them.

But still.

Sometimes she thought of how different Winterfell might have been those first few years had her lord husband told her the truth and if she had allowed herself to care for the little bastard boy who followed her son everywhere. She had thought that Robb and Jon had been trouble, but lately it seemed Arya and Bran were ten times the trouble they had ever been.

She was glad, at least, that he was no longer keeping secrets from her. The last secret he claimed he held had been shared with her just days before his departure. Catelyn still wasn’t entirely sure what to think of it, but Ned believed it and enough proof had been brought before her that she did as well. But still, it was a fantastic, horrible tale that made her weep for the pain her family had faced.

“You had asked me before if there were any other secrets I was keeping from you,” Ned had said to her as they settled into bed. He was seated on the edge, back to her as he stared out the window. The room had been too warm for even her tastes so they had opened it for a bit.

She glanced up at him from where she’d turned down her side of the bed, eying the line of his shoulders. “I did,” Catelyn acknowledged, “and you told me that the only secret you still held from me was not yours to tell. You said that one day you would share it with me.”

He nodded, a sharp tilt of his chin, his dark hair dancing across his shoulders and baring a scar.
near his neck. “I wish to share it if you would hear it.”

“I would hear it,” she said after a few moments, forcing herself to sit in the bed, back to the headboard.

Ned turned then, shifting his legs to rest on the bed, his body remaining on top of the furs. Reaching out he took her hand gently, twining their fingers together.

“When I told you of Jon’s parentage I said he had learned the truth and I felt it was time to share it with you as well,” he said quietly, eyes staring at their joined hands.

“You did,” Catelyn said, lips pursing together. It had angered her, somewhat, that Ned had told the boy before telling her. Then she had calmed down and admitted to herself that it was only right that he learned of his mother’s name before her . . . if they both had to have waited so long.

“I never said how he learned of it.”

She frowned, wondering where he was going with this. Ned had already explained that, outside of Jon, only two living people had known of the boy’s parentage when he told her: Lord Howland Reed and the wet-nurse Wylla who had gone south to serve the Daynes a bit after Jon’s third name day.

He looked up at her, meeting her gaze, his grey eyes serious and face solemn. “What I am about to share with you is unbelievable, but true. I swear upon the Old Gods and the New.”

Catelyn’s brow furrowed and she felt his hand tighten around hers ever-so-slightly.

“I never told him. Jon came to me and confronted me on it,” Ned said voice dropping to a near breathless whisper, just loud enough for her to hear. “He knew of it and other details he shouldn’t. And what he told me . . . it seems impossible but it is the complete truth.”

A chill ran down her spine and she gripped his hand back. “What did he tell you?” Catelyn asked, voice shaking slightly with nerves.

“He said that this life was not his first. That when his direwolf was born he woke up,” Ned’s eyes pleaded with her to believe him, “with memories of other lives lived. Lives where our family was torn apart and he and our children died long before their time.”

She had taken the news surprisingly well and while it had only barely stoked the anger at her husband indignation had grown on behalf of the other versions of herself who had never been told but more so for Jon who had faced so many lives a motherless bastard in the eyes of the world, bereft of truly belonging to a family.

Portions of the story had nearly thrown her into a murderous rage. To think that little Petyr . . . by the Seven what a horrible monster he had become! Worse in many ways than the description of the Bolton’s bastard Ramsay and by the Seven! what she wanted to do to that creature for what he’d done to her daughter and so many others. The man would never come within leagues of her children if she could help it.

And yet she knew that what little Ned had told her those few days before he’d left, Jon and Robb in tow, was nothing but the tip of the iceberg. There was so much more, but all he would tell her was
that to hear it would break her heart.

Catelyn was glad that he—and Jon—had chosen to trust her in this. There were some things among the plans her lord husband was making that needed a woman’s touch. Places and people that a woman could deal with that a man was not as adept with.

After retrieving Rickon, her youngest wearing his nicest outfit and toddling along with her for much of the way, she met the household in the courtyard. The servants milled about for a short time while she ensured her children were rounded up and ready to welcome their father and his party home.

When the guards announced the impending arrival, the men just minutes away, everyone sorted themselves out and stable boys readied themselves to do their duty.

It felt like years had passed from when she had last laid eyes on Ned and she wrung her hands together as she watched his horse approach at the front of the column. Robb and Jon rode behind him, both looking well and as if they had grown during their absence. All three of their direwolves trotted behind them. She looked them over for just bare moments before locking her eyes on Ned.

It seemed like ages from when he dismounted and handed off the reins to the closest stable boy to when he strode forward to reach her. She barely heard the squeals of “Robb!” and “Jon!” and the patter of running feet as her children greeted their siblings so intent was she on the man before her.

“I missed you, my lady,” Ned was the first to speak, voice low so only she could hear.

Her lips slipped into a smile and she blinked away moisture in her eyes. “And I you,” she replied just as softly.

A moment later she was in his arms and he in hers, their lips pressing sweetly together. She had missed him so much and she dared hope that he would not need to go away again for some time, not for so long. If he tried to, she might insist on going with!

“And I climbed to the top of the stables!” She heard Bran exclaim in some distant portion of her mind. The comment was filed away for future punishment to be arranged.

That night, after a feast welcoming them home where Jon had been dragged to join the family at the head table—much to his embarrassed happiness and a press of sadness on her heart—they turned in together in the lord’s chamber.

As they settled in, both tired from a long day of travel and a long day of chasing after young children respectively Catelyn settled her head onto her husband’s chest.

“Rumors have spread through the North,” she said, finger idly following a scar across his chest.

“Oh?”

“They’ve even spread as far as Riverrun,” Catelyn continued, lifting her head to look at him. “Edmure sent me a letter laughing of them. He said that they speak of an ice dragon having arisen in the North that it is an omen of a harsh winter soon to come.”

The edges of Ned’s lips quirked.

“He also told me that the rumors say the Starks have it and plan to use it to control the coming storms,” she said before she pressed her lips against his for a moment.
He drew back and didn’t bother holding back the grin this time. “Perhaps we will.”

Catelyn smiled back and then rested her head against his chest, settling in. For a few minutes, the only sounds in the room were those of their breaths. “I think you should send the letter,” she murmured, voice muffled slightly.

“Are you sure?” he asked quietly, his warm breath brushing against the crown of her head.

“Yes,” she clutched at him, gently pressing her fingers into his skin. “It’s long overdue. Send it in the morning.” She closed her eyes and breathed out, relaxing into her husband and the soft furs of their bed.

Catelyn had made an oath once. It was time she kept it.
Moat Cailin was a sight to behold, especially with the construction currently besieging it. The stronghold was arguably one of the best and most defensible ones in the seven kingdoms, having kept the North safe from invasion by the South for thousands of years, and yet it had, until a year past, been sitting in near ruins. Only three of its original twenty towers had remained standing and the tall basalt wall had lain in pieces, long destroyed. Now a wooden keep had been constructed along with a dozen other buildings to support the workers currently rebuilding the towers and portions of the walls.

This trip north had been quickly arranged, planned over several months and Jon had to rush to arrange for Lord Stannis to stand in as Hand before he uprooted his family from their home in the Red Keep for the journey. He felt it couldn’t be helped, however, not with Ned’s recent letters and requests of the crown. Each had concerned him on different levels to the point that he felt that a face to face conversation would serve better than letters where truth was easily avoided—often to prevent prying eyes from learning secrets.

Jon needed to understand what was going through the mind of the man he had raised and mentored, for he was having a difficult time making sense of Ned's goals. So, he had reached out to the Stark Lord and to the Tullys to arrange a meeting under the guise of a family reunion. It had been too long since his lady wife had seen her family and a large part of him hoped that time spent with them would calm her increasingly erratic behavior. Jon also thought it would do his son, Robert, good to see his cousins. Perhaps the trip and Lady Catelyn could convince Lysa to stop breastfeeding the boy for Seven’s sake.

After a month of ravens being exchanged plans had formed quickly and it had been decided, much to his surprise, for the meeting to take place at Moat Cailin rather than Winterfell or Riverrun.

He had heard that Ned was rebuilding portions of the old castle, refortifying it and creating a small port near the mouth of Fever River as well. Another decision to delve into the reasoning behind. As he learned more and more of what was going on in the North, Jon had naught but more questions to ask his former foster son. Something clearly had him spooked if the rumors were to be believed.

The trip had also given him the chance to meet with a variety of houses, mostly smaller ones, along the way, treating with them as Hand of the King and Lord Paramount of the Vale. He was surprised at how proud many of the families were to be receiving attention while there was an undercurrent of near disenfranchisement with the current rule that none could not hide from him. Jon didn’t speak of it, didn’t let the fact that he had noticed show in his words or actions.

Two new towers had already been completed and a great deal of progress was being made on a third along with the walls closest to the keep, stone rising as high as the original three towers and built upon the older foundations. Many of the stones had likely been repurposed from the one that
had fallen there before. Workers stilled to watch as his retinue passed and in turn, they slowed to get a good look at the construction.

Upon reaching the keep, he could see that the Starks had brought with them a large party of their own, members of their household and guard lined up behind the family. Ned stood tall, a wide smile on his face, beside Lady Catelyn and her children. They were arranged mostly from oldest to youngest, but for one that must have been little Rickon holding fast to her skirt. Ned’s oldest son, standing next to his mother, looked older than Ned had been when Jon had first laid eyes on him in his former charge.

Construction work upon the inner section of the keep and walls had been paused for their arrival. The courtyard mostly silent except for the sounds echoing in from outside.

“Lord Arryn,” Lord Stark called as Jon dismounted his horse. The wheelhouse carrying Lysa and their son following a short distance behind him. “I welcome you and your family to Moat Cailin.”

“It has been too long, Lord Stark.” Jon grinned honestly for what felt like the first time in a long while.

“Too long,” Ned agreed, smiling. “Lady Arryn,” he acknowledged her presence a moment later as Jon’s wife walked up, little Robert holding onto her hand. The boy was a bit pale but otherwise had weathered the trip relatively well. The Maester that Jon had arranged to travel with them, one he trusted from the Vale, had been keeping a close watch on the boy’s health and handling any medications he thought necessary—discarding those that he did not think prudent for the boy to be taking—much to Lysa’s dislike.

“Lord Stark,” Lysa said shortly, still unable to let go of her anger over having to make this trip. She managed a small smile for her sister though. “Catelyn.”

“Lysa,” Catelyn smiled and stepped forward to take her sister’s hand, “it seems like it has been forever since I last saw you.”

“Perhaps you should come visit us,” Lysa said shortly but squeezed Catelyn’s hand gently. “You might like King’s Landing now. It has changed over the years.”

“I’m not sure about that,” Catelyn said and her smile seemed forced to Jon’s surprise, “but I shall think on it. It would be nice to see you more often.” Her eyes landed on Robert who had shifted to hide behind his mother’s skirts. “And this must be young Robert . . . or Robin I believe you call him?”

Lysa nodded and gently pulled their son to stand in front of her. “Sweetrobin, this is your Aunt Catelyn. I’ve told you of her.”

He watched her with wide, curious but cautious eyes.

Catelyn just smiled and stepped back a pace, letting go of her sister’s hand.

“Lady Catelyn,” Jon said then, stepping forward to greet his goodsister. “You have only grown more beautiful with time, just as my lady wife has.”

“Thank you, Lord Arryn.” Catelyn tilted her head in acknowledgment.

“And these are your children.” He looked them over from the smallest to the tallest.

“My eldest son and heir, Robb,” Ned introduced each. “Our daughters Sansa and Arya, our son...
Jon Arryn raised an eyebrow. “Your entire family has come? I thought there was that saying that the Stark family ascribed to: There must always be a Stark in Winterfell. I believe?”

“Benjen is currently in Winterfell,” Ned said, nodding, “on business for the Night’s Watch. He is organizing the recruits that have been arriving for the Watch, along with the tradesmen King Robert has sent and will be there for several more moons. If he has need to leave before then Robb and Jon will ride to Winterfell.”

Jon nodded before glancing about. “And where is my namesake?”

Ned smiled and glanced over his shoulder; he gave a short nod and it was but a moment before a boy stepped forward. He had the Stark look, more so than any of his siblings save perhaps the youngest girl, Arya. He was also a tad shorter than his brother, slighter of build as well. While Jon Snow looked very much like Ned, there were subtle differences in his build and look that differed from how Ned had looked when he was four and ten.

“This is my natural son, Jon Snow.”

The boy stared at him, cool grey eyes peering out from a solemn face, dark curly hair crowning his head as Jon Arryn got his first good look of the boy that had been named for him.

Jon Snow was also one of the reasons behind Jon Arryn’s visit.

*Jon stared at the letter in front of him, eyes skimming over sentence after sentence before turning back to the beginning and starting over. Without a doubt, this was the longest letter he had ever received from Ned, outside of the annual reports required of the Warden of the North alongside taxes, and the subject matter was highly varied and . . . strange.*

*A large portion of the letter was devoted to requests on behalf of the Night’s Watch—requests that had apparently been ignored by the crown, the majority of the Lords across most of the Seven Kingdoms, and even the Citadel. There was something about the subject matter of every topic within the letter that had alarm bells sounding in the back of his mind. In all the years that Ned had been Lord Stark and Warden of the North not once had he made requests for the Watch; in fact, he was quite succinct in general with the North’s business as well.*

*Now though? Not only was he reporting the initiation of dozens of construction projects across the North, some in the capable hands of his bannermen, but he was exercising his authority to make demands upon the Night’s Watch. One that Jon couldn’t remember any Stark doing in recent memory. There were lists of requests for supplies, manpower, ships, and at least three maesters.*

*The request for manpower wasn’t new, the Watch always sent out requests and recruiters for more men, but they were requesting skilled laborers even noting that they were willing to take temporary workers in exchange for missed taxes to help rebuild castles along the Wall that had fallen into disrepair and to help train up members of the watch to a higher standard.*

*It seems, going through the carefully copied documents that Ned stated he personally retrieved from Lord Commander Mormont, that lords from every kingdom, except for the North, had been ignoring their obligations to the Watch—even as the crown lessened those obligations considerably over the years. He supposed it made sense, whereas the South, in general, saw the
Watch as a glorified penal colony, the North still saw it as an honorable place to serve and find glory.

The requests for the Watch and the notices of construction in places such as Moat Cailin and Queenscrown were surprising enough, but there was another point in the letter that had Jon Arryn’s mind whirling in confusion. Ned made a point of letting him know he had also sent a letter to King Robert advising him that he was awaiting a response to a letter he had sent his friend several weeks prior.

It hadn’t taken long for Jon to dig the letter out of the pile Robert had handed over, unopened, requesting he respond to. He thought that perhaps his former foster son hadn’t bothered to check the seals for surely if he had realized a letter was there from Ned he would have opened it.

Following the niceties and general news and goodwill wishes was a request. A request for Ned’s bastard son, Jon Snow, to be legitimized by the crown.

It had thrown Jon, for last he had heard from his lady wife her sister still complained about the bastard’s presence in Winterfell. Lysa certainly liked to complain about him and the stain on her sister’s—and Ned’s—honor as often as she could. She oft complained a lot about all manner of subjects, however, circling back from present-day woes to childhood complaints on a lark.

He glanced from one letter to the other and his brow furrowed. Ned was rebuilding Moat Cailin and Queenscrown. A castle for one of his younger trueborn sons and another for his bastard, perhaps?

Sighing, he glanced at the window, judging the time, and stood, pocketing the letters. It took him a while to track the King down, which sadly was not out of the ordinary. While Jon did care greatly for the man, having practically raised him, for a King he did very little actual ruling. Instead, he chose to leave governing to his small council and his Hand—Jon himself.

There were fleeting moments when Jon wished that near anyone else was on the throne instead. Ned would have ruled with honor, Lord Tywin for all the trouble that would have caused at least would have ruled, Lord Stannis if he thought someone in the realm needed a hard hand, or, when he was feeling particularly annoyed, even himself as it seemed he often spent more time sitting on the throne than Robert did.

King Robert Baratheon was taking a late brunch in the gardens, blessedly bereft of whores, surrounded by serving woman that he was flirting wildly with. They were all beautiful, handpicked no doubt by the King himself as he was wont to do if his Queen wasn’t about. His eye nearly twitched at the sight, thinking about what plans would need to be made should one of the women, as they no doubt would give in to the King’s passions, should bear a child.

He loved Robert but sometimes he wished he could run away to the Vale and watch as the realm fell apart. Jon had spent the last fourteen years picking up after the man’s messes.

“Pardon the interruption, your grace,” Jon started, securing only a slightly irritated look form the King.

Robert surveyed him for a moment, only minutely hesitating in waving away the servants for the time being. “What ill-begotten news do you have for me, Lord Hand?”

“I received a letter from Lord Stark, as did the crown . . . and you also received a personal letter that ended up within the documents you asked me to look over for your grace.” Jon stepped closer, sitting when Robert bid him to.
His former foster son’s eyes lit up at word of his foster brother. “A letter from Ned?” he laughed, grinning widely. “Where is it then?”

Jon Arryn retrieved it and quickly handed it over, setting the letter for the crown on the table in front of himself as well. He watched as Robert read over the letter, taking in the minute facial changes. Ned did not write to the King much and Robert treasured each letter he received from the man.

“Draw up the legitimization papers and I shall sign them,” Robert said, setting the letter on the table beside his dish. He made a motion in the air and moments later a servant arrived at the beckon of his guard to fill the King’s goblet. As he drank he picked up the letter for the crown and reviewed it as well.

Jon waited for him to set the letter aside before speaking. “I will have the documents drawn up. What should be done about the other requests?”

Robert made a face as he cut into a summer sausage. “Remind me to bring it up at the next small council. We will decide what support to lend and what we can afford to give. Does he speak of why this is suddenly so important to him in the letter you received?”

“No,” Jon said, honestly a bit surprised at the King’s caution when it came to Ned’s requests. Most that Lord Stark had made in the past were met with immediate support. Perhaps Lord Baelish’s discussion of the crown’s debt at the last meeting the King attended had sunk in somewhat for once. “Ned is not one to make requests without reason, however.”

“What reason could there be?” Robert scoffed between bites. “Wildling raiders roving south of the wall to find food for winter? If he’s worried about them stealing from his bannermen or the small folk I can send him troops to garrison the wall. A few hundred or a thousand green young men needing to draw their first blood could beat back those savages with ease. And it would provide some much-needed experience.”

But soldiers weren’t what Ned and Jeor Mormont were requesting. “And the builders?”

“The letter said they weren’t going to be required to take the Black, didn’t it?”

“That is correct,” Jon affirmed. “It seems they are requesting temporary services to effect repairs upon some of the castles along the wall. They would not need to take the vows just respect the Watch’s authority while they work.”

“I see no reason why we cannot provide builders and laborers on a temporary basis, if they truly need it,” Robert pointed towards the letter to the crown which contained the list of lords who owed taxes—the crown itself was near the top of the list—and continued, “especially those that owe back taxes. A ridiculous number of lords have neglected their duty it seems.”

“And the educated men and Maesters?”

“Pen an ultimatum of some sort to the Citadel.” Roberts face darkened. “They should have sent a replacement for the old Targaryen years ago, knowing their proclivities,” he spat.

Jon bit his tongue. Maester Aemon by all reports was the complete opposite of the late King Aerys in disposition. Perhaps if he had been King the realm wouldn’t have fallen into disarray and a rebellion wouldn’t have been needed.

“At least the old man had the foresight to exile himself to the wall,” Robert continued, grumbling into his cup.
“Lord Stark implies that Maester Aemon is in rather poor health,” Jon put in, picking up the letter to the crown. “He will not be a worry for much longer.” His words were intended to soothe and placate.

Robert scoffed.

“I will see you at the small council meeting this afternoon then?” Jon asked, switching subjects and pushing his chair back from his table.

“Yes, Yes,” Robert said, waving him away.

Jon bowed and moved to leave.

“Remember those papers!” Robert called out suddenly. “If Ned wants his bastard to bear his name then he shall.” He ‘hmmed thoughtfully as he reached for a plate of sweet bread. “Perhaps I should think about legitimizing one or two of mine . . . my girl in the Vale. What is her name?”

Jon Arryn sighed and turned, moving to return the table. He would have to unravel this mess before Queen Cersei heard word of Robert’s musings. Hopefully, Jon could prevent him from making a mistake that would lead to someone’s murder.

“Mya Stone.”

“Yes, her!” Robert nodded to himself. “I could use another daughter to marry off.”
Jon chuckled, watching as Ned’s eldest boys, Robb Stark and Jon Snow, walked his son, Bran Stark, and Arya Stark through the correct grip and how to aim small bows, carefully crafted for young children. The draw strength was so small the blunted arrows would do little but flop to the ground a few feet away. Robb was working with his cousin while Jon carefully placed his younger brother’s fingers. Arya stood a step away, staring intently and copying the placement with her own fingers.

His son looked a bit pale today, but his cough had mostly subsided in the last couple of weeks under the care of Maester Haburt who Jon had called from a loyal Vale house to accompany them on the road. Robert also hadn’t experienced more than one shaking episode during the trip. Jon had spent as much time as he could with the boy on the road, but he had been unable to separate him from his lady wife’s side for long. At least until they arrived. The Stark children and Lady Catelyn had managed what he had been unable to; separating mother and son so that little Robert could have some time out from under his mother’s control.

Each day Robert had spent more time with his cousins than with anyone else and Lady Catelyn seemed to have made it her own prerogative to spend as much time as possible with Lysa. Jon wasn’t quite sure what to make of it for it seemed as if it wasn’t just Lady Catelyn’s desire to spend time with her sister who she had not seen for years. In fact, there was a tenseness around his goodsister’s eyes when she thought no one was watching if Lysa was nearby.

“I was very surprised when we received the legitimization request,” Jon spoke as he stood beside Ned on the battlement. They had a good view of the courtyard as well as the construction on the nearby towers from where they stood. “I was rather shocked as Lysa had given me the impression that Lady Catelyn . . .” he glanced at his foster son, “. . . despised the boy and that she was unhappy that he is being raised in Winterfell.” It was an oft-heard complaint over the years from what Lysa had spoken of with him.

Several times she had suggested—and he had done so in part due to his love for Ned—that he offer to foster the boy with one of the Vale lords. Each offer had been declined with a perfunctory ‘thank you, but no thank you’ letter.

Ned grimaced. “She was not,” he confirmed, his previous smile falling away, “but since Rickon’s birth she has . . . had a change of heart regarding Jon.”

\textit{A third boy, plus two girls, does lengthen the line of inheritance considerably,} he thought. His lips twisted and he narrowed his eyes slightly as he watched the children. Arya and Bran were glaring at each other while Jon had a hand on both their shoulders, leaning down to speak with them. \textit{Usually, more children in a line of succession meant it was less likely for a bastard to be legitimized, though.}

Ned continued speaking into the silence as Jon mulled over his words. “I believe she sees him more as . . . perhaps a nephew now.”

Jon’s eyes shifted to Ned for a moment and then looked back down at the boy who was grinning widely, watching as both Arya and Bran stood side by side in identical positions. “Oh?” he asked, eyebrow-raising. “Do you know what exactly spurred this change in attitude?” He glanced back at Ned in time to see a guilt cross his features before disappearing behind a solemn mask.

“I know only what she has told me,” Ned said, sighing. “She did not wish to share details, but she
was the one to bring up legitimizing him when we began work here and at Queenscrown.”

“You are going to gift him a hold?” Jon asked, staring in surprise at the other man. It wasn’t unheard of, for lords to gift their bastard’s a hold and even legitimize them into a cadet branch. House Stark had done it multiple times and even House Targaryen had. Sometimes it turned out well and the new House became staunchly loyal to their originator. Other times, such as with House Blackfyre, wars ensued.

“Perhaps,” Ned hedged with a sigh, a small smile quirked his lips as he glanced towards Jon Snow. “He would do well as a lord of a hold, but I am unsure if that is what he wants.”

While Jon had been sure that Ned was lying or at least avoiding providing him the truth earlier, in this, at least, he could tell he was being honest.

“And what does he wish to do then?” Jon asked, he was truly curious as prospects for bastards—even legitimized—north of Dorne were not generally the best unless they were considered the heir due to lack of trueborn progeny. Most Houses kept their bastards far from their trueborn children to prevent legitimization issues. It was why he had brought two of King Robert’s bastards with him to send them to the Night's Watch. Being exiled to the Wall was likely their best option in life at this point.

“He has stated repeatedly that he wishes nothing more than to keep his family and home safe,” Ned said softly. “It is a cause I believe to be central to his entire being. I have no doubt that he would do near anything to keep Robb and the other children safe.” A small, sad smile graced his face. “That is why I do not know if he would accept a hold of his own. He may, once his siblings are older and finding their own place in the world. Or he may stay by Robb’s side in Winterfell until his last day.”

Jon nodded in thought, turning back to watch the children only to see his son failing to pull back the weak bowstring. He sighed, wishing there was more he could do for his son’s health and hoping that the new maester, Maester Haburt, would be able to locate the root of the cause and find a better treatment than those provided in King’s Landing.

His eyes caught on a flash of white at the corner of the courtyard. Four of the Stark’s direwolves—the smaller, younger ones—were darting around a corner, the pure white one at the front with something furry in its mouth. The largest grey one was close behind. They were still shocking to see, although it was Ned’s wolf that was the most majestic; large enough for the Stark Lord to ride should he choose.

He turned away, back to Ned and smiled. “You mentioned a tour of the new towers?”

“No!” his lady wife screamed at him, blue eyes narrowed viciously as she glared at him. “I refuse! The trip would be hazardous to my little boy’s health!”

Gritting his teeth, Jon held back the sigh that threatened to escape and pushed away his building headache. “The Maester, both of which I took him to, assured me he would be healthy enough for the trip, “ he repeated once again.

“He is too young!”

“Women travel often with much younger children,” he pointed out, hand gripping the arms of his
chair tightly. “Your own sister traveled with her firstborn from Riverrun to Winterfell when he was but moons old. Our son is five name days old. We will be traveling through your homeland much of the way and it will give him a chance to meet his Aunt, Uncles, and cousins. He has not met any of your family but Ser Brynden and that was two years ago. I doubt Robert even remembers him. It would be good for him and for us to spend some time with family.”

Before she could gather her voice to speak further, Jon stood, moving from his chair to stand before her. “You have talked of seeing your sister in the past and yet now that I have finally arranged for us to not only see Lady Stark but her children and members of your own family you balk!”

She glared at him, eyes frozen daggers attempting to pierce his very soul. The fury in her gaze astonished him somewhat. While he was quite aware that she was not exactly happy with her situation in life—being his lady wife—the stark clarity of what he was seeing shocked him.

No matter what she thought of him, he was bound by honor to do what was best for their son and for the realm. He needed information and to speak with Lord Stark face to face and he wished for his son to spend time with family. As ill as little Robert was it would be good for him to make allies of his cousins for support in the future.

“We will be stopping at various keeps along the way,” Jon said, schooling his face into a blank mask. “Robert will have access to multiple Maesters, including Maester Haburt who is riding to meet us from the Vale to assist in our son’s care.” Jon moved to walk around his wife but paused before he passed her, eyes locking with hers. “This is not up for debate. We will be going.”

As strode away he heard a crash of glass and other objects as Lysa swept the objects from the desk to the floor and screeched her rage.
Before traveling north, Jon Arryn had offered to travel along with the Tullys—Lord Edmure and Ser Brynden were to be traveling north while Lord Hoster, whose health had recently started to decline, had been forced to remain at Riverrun—but the offer had been gently refused. Lord Edmure had stated in a letter he planned to visit the lords and ladies of the Riverlands along the route to Moat Cailin. The two had arrived five days after the Arryn’s party and were greeted in much the same way only this time the Arryns were standing beside the Starks and Ned’s bastard son was nowhere to be seen.

There was, of course, a feast to welcome Edmure and the Blackfish that night and as Jon scanned the hall he noticed that the boy was also absent, seemingly disappeared into thin air with the arrival of Lady Catelyn’s brother and uncle. The other Stark children had noticed and seemed a bit disconcerted about him not partaking alongside them as he had at the feast celebrating House Arryn’s arrival.

A couple hours into the feast, Jon took a short leave from the festivities needing to empty his bladder. He also hoped to alleviate the headache that had begun to creep at the base of his skull due to the loud noise in the hall. As the keep was new, and in large part temporary until a fully stone keep could be constructed in the coming years, the great hall was relatively small, which made noise loud and the air thick from the dozens of bodies within it.

Deciding to clear his head after relieving himself, he took a long walk around the perimeter of the courtyard. There were a few other people milling about, including one of the Stark guards leaning against a wall about ten paces from where Jon Snow was tossing a large stick through the air for two of the direwolves—his own pure white one and the largest of his sibling wolves, which Jon thought was Robb’s—to run after.

Jon watched the boy for a moment and then walked over, seeing his shoulders tense when Jon came close to him. The guard shifted his feet and hands slightly but remained leaning against the wall.

He watched for a couple minutes, just until the muscles in his namesake’s shoulders relaxed some. “When my lady wife told me Lady Catelyn wrote to her of your father and all his children having real direwolves for _pets_, I could scarcely believe it,” he said as wolves circled around Snow’s legs after returning the branch.

“Yours is the white one?” Jon tilted his head, watching as the two tussled over the branch. “Ghost,” Snow confirmed. “The other is Grey Wind . . . he’s Robb’s.” The wolves returned then, Grey Wind having won the branch this round as he was the one to drop it at Snow’s feet. They were both panting a bit, tongues lolling out of their mouths.

“They aren’t pets, my lord,” Snow said a long moment later after he tossed the branch as far as he could across the yard. He glanced over at Jon as the wolves skittered across the dirt.

Tilting his head, Jon watched as the two tussled over the branch. “Yours is the white one?”

“Ghost,” Snow confirmed. “The other is Grey Wind . . . he’s Robb’s.” The wolves returned then, Grey Wind having won the branch this round as he was the one to drop it at Snow’s feet. They were both panting a bit, tongues lolling out of their mouths.

“Have you been exercising them the entire feast?” he asked, watching as the wolves chased the branch again.

The boy shrugged. “I ate in the kitchens earlier,” he replied as Ghost began a loping jog back with the branch in his mouth. He kneeled to meet the direwolf, taking a moment to rub his fingers through the fur over the wolf’s eyes and behind his ears. “The Tullys have never been . . . fond of

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Interlude: Jon Arryn Part III
“Lady Catelyn seems relatively amicable toward you,” Jon said, watching as the boy ducked his head before sliding a grey-eyed glance his way from behind dark curls.

“Lady Ca—Stark is kind to me,” he confirmed softly.

Tilting his head in agreement, Jon kept his eyes on the boy. Lady Catelyn had a remarkably good attitude towards her husband’s bastard considering all reports he’d previously had regarding her thoughts on him. It was still troubling to him how quickly her mind seemed to have shifted.

“Much nicer than most in her situation north of Dorne.” Jon watched as the boy’s shoulders shifted and tensed. “It seems to be a recent change.”

The boy said nothing, just tossed the stick for the wolves again.

“When you were younger, I sent several offers to Lord Stark to foster you in the Vale.”

Snow started at that, glancing over at Jon in surprise. “You did?” he asked, brow knitting together.

“I did,” Jon confirmed, nodding. “I believed that if you were anything like Ned you would do well in the Vale,” he paused for a moment, eyes running over the boy’s features, “and I thought it might alleviate tensions in Winterfell between him and Lady Catelyn. Fostering would have opened up additional options for you, perhaps allowing you to become a knight as some bastards have.” He glanced down at the direwolves as they came to a stop at Snow’s side. The white one was staring at him with bright red eyes. “Your father declined my offers.”

“He wished for me to grow up in Winterfell,” Snow said after a moment, his right-hand tangling in Grey Wind’s fur. “To know my siblings.”

“He did,” Jon acknowledged watching the boy’s interaction with the wolves. He had not seen anyone else come even close to touching Robb’s wolf except the Stark heir himself. “And you did. Your siblings are very attached to you.”

The boy’s left hand flexed and Ghost stepped forward, angling himself between the two men, his neck dropping slightly and shoulders hunching as he stared at Jon.

“I would never hurt them,” Snow said, his voice low, but even, while his face schooled into a blank mask.

“I didn’t say you would.”

The boy looked away again, staring down at Grey Wind who glanced up at him. “I know what they say in the south about bastards. How we are viewed.” Snow glanced up again, meeting Jon’s gaze. “I don’t lust after my sibling’s birthright. I love them. They are my family and Winterfell is my home, but Robb will be its lord. I will not.” His chin lifted, curly hair falling away from his face. “I would die to protect him—any of them. I don’t want what is theirs.” There was a pause in his speech before he drew in a deep breath. “You could offer me anything. Gold. Titles. A throne. I wouldn’t usurp them.”

“I am sorry if you took offense at my words,” Jon said, stepping forward his hand raised as if to settle it on the boy’s shoulder. Ghost paced forward another step to keep them separate. “I only wished to point out how cared for you are. I see it in your siblings and in Lord Stark’s eyes when they see you.” Even Lady Catelyn seemed to hold some level of affection for the boy.
Snow glanced away from him then, taking a step back as his eyes locked on a nearby figure. Jon realized that the Stark guard had stepped a pace from the wall and was watching the exchange, eyes mostly focused on him rather than the boy although the guard’s eyes swept the surroundings for any threats.

“Is there anything I may help you with, Lord Arryn?” Snow said a moment later as Ghost circled to return to his side. “I believe the kitchen staff have prepared food for the direwolves that I should retrieve as my siblings and Lord Stark are busy.”

A rather diplomatic request to be dismissed from the conversation. “Not tonight,” Jon said, dropping his arm to his side. “Tomorrow, however, if your brother and yourself are willing I would like to see the two of you spar on the training ground. I have heard from Ned and others that both of you are quite skilled with the sword.”

“I will speak with him of it,” Snow answered, stepping away to pick up the discarded branch. Grey Wind took Ghost’s spot in standing between the two humans. “I am sure he would be willing.”

“In the morning, then,” Jon Arryn said and watched as the young man nodded and turned away, quietly making his way across the courtyard with the two direwolves at his heels.

The guard eyed Jon for a moment before stepping from the wall and bowing slightly to Jon. “My lord,” he murmured and then followed in boy’s wake.

Jon Arryn watched after them for a long moment, lips pressed together and eyes narrowed in thought. It wasn’t often that a bastard child was guarded as avidly as the heir and other trueborn children, but Ned had one of his best guards following at the boy’s ankles. It was something he’d noticed, the larger presence of Stark guards than most households, even when visiting other Lords, would have. At least one guard was always a short distance from the children and his lady wife and all of them highly skilled from what Jon had seen in the practice field in the early mornings and when they took turns teaching the eldest boys or testing their skills against each other.

Something had scared Ned, something that had him worried for his family’s safety—every member’s safety whether they carried the Stark name or not. And something had convinced his foster son that Jon Snow needed the protection of the Stark name.

Breathing out a deep breath, Jon turned and headed back towards the dining hall to return to the festivities; he was getting too old to deal with the drama of politics, but needs must. His eyes took in the various men and women he passed, servants and guards milling around and going about their duties. A young couple, two servants, giggled in the shadows their hands tangled together as they slunk through the dark.

“Wan see Winta,” a sleepy, childish voice murmured a short distance away and Jon looked over to see Sansa Stark carrying Rickon Stark in her arms. His head was tucked under her chin, their red hair blending together in the dim light. “An’ Shaggy.”

“Shhh,” the girl murmured, pausing a step to glance around. “Shaggydog is in the kennel, we’ll see him in the morning.”

“Winta?” The young boy pulled back to look at his older sister, hand letting go of her shirt to come up and rub at his eyes.

“Lady Sansa . . .” a hushed voice of a nearby guard said with a hint of warning, stepping closer.

“Winter is in Winterfell,” Sansa said quickly, voice barely carrying to where Jon was standing just
out of sight. “Remember the rules?”

“Wan see Winta,” Rickon said again, chin wobbling. “’M cold.”

Sansa adjusted her grip on him, pulled his furs tighter around him, and shushed him again. “How about we go see the direwolves? I think Jon is with them.” She moved off then walking quickly towards the kennels. “You wanted to see Shaggydog, right?”

Jon watched them go, realizing the guard had seen him as he was eyed for a long moment before the man trailed after the two children.

The northerners were wary of southerners, yes, after all their traditions were very different from those of the South. But the Vale, and the Riverlands, of which all the visitors—bar a few servants—that were present belonged to were staunch allies of the North. Of course, there was a large number of workers camped beyond the ramparts, a group less able to be vetted properly for loyalty and whose behavior to young maidens could be less than appropriate.

He rubbed at the bridge of his nose, unhappy at the thoughts that were niggling at the back of his mind both regarding the North's seeming interest in fortification and protection and what he had seen of Jon Snow during the past five days. The list of topics he needed to discuss with Ned was growing by the hour along with his headache.

The trip had seemed like a good idea at the time, but he was starting to think the only good thing to come of it might be his lady wife’s growing anxiety and paranoia seemed to be lessening somewhat around her family. Perhaps he might even be able to coax her into an actual conversation at some point on this trip.
“My lord, I have spent over half a decade teaching the boy my trade,” Tobho Mott said, staring at him with a bit of anger underneath the politeness of protocol. “He is talented and hardworking and still has much to learn, but has the ability and intelligence to do so. I see no reason why he should be shipped off to the Night's Watch.”

“When I paid you to take him as your apprentice,” Jon Arryn replied, sighing, “I hoped he would be able to make a life and live happily as a blacksmith here, where he was born.” He stared over the man’s shoulder to the back of the shop where the young man was working away. The noise in the smithy hid the sound of their hushed voices as they bent over a breastplate. “I hoped that he would be safe, but I find that I can no longer guarantee it. I fear someone will recognize him soon.”

Tobho glanced over at the boy and sighed. “When you first brought him to me I believed him the bastard of a lord,” he shook his head and turned back to Jon, “but at his age, I can see clearly his father in him and I have not had much of a chance to look upon his grace. I have perhaps laid eyes on the man but a handful of times.”

Jon nodded in agreement. Gendry looked exactly as his father had at his age. So very alike all of Robert’s other bastards and so very different from his supposed trueborn children.

“But the Night’s Watch?” Tobho asked. “It would be such a waste of talent for him to be sent to the Wall.”

“They need the men and asked for skilled workers. King Robert has decided to humor their request and is insisting on a number of workers in trades be sent along with the usual crowd,” Jon answered. “It is a good excuse to get him from the city along with a group of fellow workers. The boy may not be happy about it, but it will keep him alive at least.”

“And yet you ask me to lie and say that he would not be able to work to the level of skill I need in my shop.” Tobho’s hand clenched into a fist on the table and he shook his head. “Fine, I will do this, but you must find me a replacement. Or two, if they are not skilled enough to fill young Gendry’s shoes.”

Jon stared at Ned, trying to form thoughts around what his foster son was saying. “You wish to foster Robert’s bastards?”

“Provide those in need with a safe haven, yes,” Ned affirmed as he leaned back in his chair. “Such as the two boys that you brought with you. They are both hard workers, spending their days assisting in the construction. They volunteered without being asked, from what I hear. They won’t necessarily be fostered in Winterfell, but I can find safe harbor for any in need among my bannermen at the very least. If any begin to cause trouble for my family or King Robert’s, then they can always be sent along to the wall.” He tapped a finger against the rim of his glass. “You must admit they are rather young to join the watch. The younger boy is, what, eight name days old?”

“Not quite.” Jon nodded. “They are quite willing workers. Young Gendry was apprenticed to
Tobho Mott in King's Landing and the man had nothing but good words to say about his hard work and skills to everyone but the boy of course. And what of his daughters?"

"Are there any that you worry for?"

He glanced away, looking towards the fire. They were in a small, out of the way, room that Ned had claimed for his solar during his stay in Moat Cailin. It was the perfect spot for a private chat and much quieter than other places as the window opened to look opposite of where most of the construction was taking place.

Taking a sip of ale from the glass in his hand, Jon took the moment to gather his thoughts. Robert’s bastards were numerous and much of the time he doubted that even he and his careful accounting of the King’s whores and paramours knew of all the man’s children. Most were boys, easily identifiable upon birth for their strong Baratheon coloring and resemblance to the King as they grew older. The girls were the ones whose looks most often departed from their father’s. Though there was only one of the female bastards whose looks made him doubt her parentage.

Mya, he knew, would be safe in the Vale at least and Jon had already been approached a few times with marriage offers for the young lady. The King had yet to approve of any, having the final say although she was under the auspices of House Arryn for the most part. King Robert had only brought her marriage up once after a spat with Cersei, during one drunk raving Jon had found him pondering over legitimizing her, but Jon had managed to talk him out of both legitimizing her and forcing his daughter to leave her home in the Vale—at least for now.

Several of the King’s bastards, like with Mya, Jon had personally seen to arranging better lives for. Gendry, for example, had been born to waitress in a tavern in flea bottom and upon her death he had ensured the boy survived and was fed until an age he, with Lord Varys’ assistance—the man had been the one who brought the boys existence to his attention—could arrange an apprenticeship for him. If things had gone as planned Gendry would have learned under Tobho Mott until he knew enough to become a master blacksmith and perhaps open his own shop. He would have been able to make a name for himself and perhaps find a wife and have children . . . but then things changed.

Several of Robert’s bastards had disappeared within the last year, younger boys and girls of more well known, but not noble, women that the King had bedded. It had worried him enough to convince Tobho Mott to relinquish the boy to him to take him north with his party and the men he was bringing to join the Watch.

Ned approaching him about apprenticing the boy to Winterfell’s blacksmith, Mikken, and finding a place for the other boy among Winterfell or another northern household had shocked him. He turned towards the other man, finding him watching with a solemn look on his face.

It sent a chill down his spine and he felt the familiar twinge of a headache begin. Since arriving at Moat Cailin there were times it seemed as if Ned knew more of the politics of the South then he rightly should.

“I worry for them all,” Jon said finally, “but,” he sighed, “the girls I do not believe to be in much danger.”

“And the boys?” Ned asked, voice a deep rumble.

“Some have gone missing,” he admitted, “as well as any close family members that were still in their lives.” Sighing he glanced towards the open window. “When you mentioned the Watch is in need of skilled labor I saw it as a chance to remove Gendry and his younger brother from King's Landing and, hopefully, harm’s way. Gendry’s a good lad and a hard worker, diligent.”
“Which is why I’m offering him a place, besides his obvious parentage.” Ned stood and paced towards the desk nearby to retrieve another stein of alcohol. They already finished off the last. “He has been aiding in the construction during his time here and I have heard naught but good things about him and his skills.” He paused, facing away from Jon. “Do you know why they may be disappearing?”

“I have a theory,” Jon said, watching his former charge. “One I wish would be wrong, but is seeming to be more and more like the truth.”

Ned said nothing has he checked a couple of containers and their contents. He said nothing, but his silence often said more than his words.

“Often, I think if I were to speak my thoughts aloud, it would make them true. I’m not sure what I will do if they are.” Jon shifted, turning to look back at Ned before dropping his gaze to his cup.

“I have heard,” Ned started and then paused as he poured a glass of alcohol, still facing away from Jon, “that the princes and princess are the spitting image of their mother.”

Jon stilled, hand grasping his cup tighter. “They are.”

“Not such an uncommon thing,” Ned said as he turned, offering the stein to Jon who waved it away for the moment. “My own children take after their mother, for the most part.” He moved to return to his seat. “But their Stark blood can readily be seen beneath their Tully coloring by most anyone.”

“What have you heard?” Jon asked, voice devoid of any emotion. For Ned to have heard what Jon had only in the past half-year started to suspect . . . He stared hard at his friend. “Be straight with me. Do not play with words, politics have never been your strong suit, Ned.”

Ned inclined his head in acknowledgment. “Rumors that the royal children are pure lion with not a single drop of stag blood within them.”

He schooled his features before raising an eyebrow. “As you said: they take after their mother.”

Lips quirking slightly at the edge, Ned shook his head. “I’ve heard that they may take after their father just as much as they do their mother.” He met Jon’s gaze fully. “That Gendry and Mya Stone are not their half-siblings at all.”

“Such speech would be treason,” Jon said, voice tight. By the Seven . . . where had Ned heard this up in Winterfell? If he was aware of this, when the North notoriously received news and court gossip long after the other kingdoms, what did the other high lords know or suspect? He suspected Varys knew but thought the Master of Whispers was keeping the truth quiet for the good of the realm. If there was one thing he could trust was that the man thought of the realm before all else. It was what had kept him alive after the fall of King Aerys.

“It would,” Ned acknowledged, “but is it the truth? My sources say it is . . .” he pressed his lips together, “. . . and I am inclined to believe them.”

Jon sat his glass down and stared at his hands for a long moment before he buried his head in his hands. Perhaps his age was beginning to catch up with him; there were few people in his life he felt he could truly trust. He had tried so hard in the last fourteen years to hold the realm together and support Robert’s reign. At every turn, the royal family—every member except perhaps little Tommen and Myrcella—seemed to be wanting to tear the delicate balance of power apart. Even his lady wife, a woman who was supposed to be his stalwart companion, was fraying his nerves constantly.
“Jon?” Ned asked, moving closer and setting his own glass aside.

“By the Seven, I wish it weren’t so, but I think it is.” Jon dropped his hands and squared his shoulders. “All but one of his bastards have his exact coloring and I cannot confirm that the one that doesn’t is actually his. They are all black of hair with the Baratheon looks just as all others of the Baratheon line have been. By all reports, the Baratheon coloring has overrode the looks of all other houses they have married into. Even when marrying into the Targaryens and one would think as a bastard line of that house marrying into it might allow for the occasional silver-haired babe or violet eyes to come from the coupling, but it hasn’t.” He shook his head. “Perhaps a few things could be explained away, but I and others have questions on the interactions of the Queen and her brother—the Kingslayer—that raise doubts.” He couldn’t help but let out a dark, bark of a laugh. “And I cannot account for the timing of Prince Tommen’s birth, by all rights he should have been early but the midwife and Maester both claimed he was of normal size, if not bigger, for a newborn babe.”

Healthy and robust and arguably bigger than his elder brother had been when he should have been, by all accounts, born near two moons early. It was one of the facts that had niggled at the back of Jon’s mind until finally, too many coincidences existed for him to ignore. He let out another harsh, humorless laugh. “The Red Keep is full of servants and watchful eyes loyal first to the Queen’s family. It’s a Lion’s den and Robert is a Stag dancing among a pride that is growing hungrier and hungrier. He’s oblivious to it all. I feel like I’m watching a volcano near ready to blow and the people settled beneath it are completely oblivious.”

“Have you spoken with anyone at all?” Ned asked.

“Stannis,” Jon said, meeting Ned’s eyes again. “It was he who first raised my concern. A bastard within his auspices went missing and he was approached by the boy’s aunt to see if perhaps arrangements had been made quietly for the boy as he’d recently turned of age to apprentice. Both his mother and the child had disappeared.”

“And none had been made.”

“None had been made,” Jon confirmed. “The woman had been approached by several men in the days before her disappearance to take the boy off her hands for training. She declined them all. Stannis believes they were Lannister men and my sources have confirmed the likelihood of it.”

“And Stannis came to you instead of Robert?”

“Do you think Robert would have handled this with the care needed?” Jon sighed as Ned shook his head. Robert would likely have demanded a manhunt and found someone to blame whether he found the right person or not. More than likely he would be led by those that caused the disappearance to a convenient suspect that had nothing to do with the child’s death. “He lacks many qualities that some would say are required of a ruler. He is more apt to throw accusations and demand someone’s head without investigating the veracity of the accused’s guilt.”

He couldn’t help but envision what would happen if Jon brought his thoughts of Joffrey and the other children’s true parentage before the King. Of what Robert would do to Queen Cersei without hesitation—of what he would likely do to the children no matter their innocence in the matter.

Ned was quiet for a moment. “Whether Robert may react badly or not,” he paused for a second, “I would caution against approaching any of the Lannisters with our theory before him and before King’s Landing is sufficiently fortified with non-Lannister forces. I do not think that any Lion, from the Queen to Lord Tywin, would take kindly to such words.”
Jon had to agree with the assessment. “I must tread very carefully, perhaps arrange for the children to visit family in Storms End or on Dragonstone.”

Nodding, Ned didn’t bother saying anything in response. There was only so much the Warden of the North could do to affect the politics of King’s Landing and Jon knew that his former charge had no interest in going south. He was starting to understand why Lord Stark had begun to refortify Moat Cailin and it wasn’t just so that one of his younger sons might one day have a hold of their own. If the Iron Throne’s line of succession was in question and Robert died . . . war would divide the kingdoms and no matter who House Stark supported the North would need to protect their own if a harsh winter was on its way.

He picked up his glass again as Ned retrieved the stein and offered it to him. After refilling it to the brim, Jon took a long pull of the northern ale, the slight burn tickling his throat. He stared at the liquid as it calmed within the glass. Southern politics wasn’t the only subject he needed to speak with Ned about.

“I spoke with your son, Jon, the other day. The evening of the feast.”

“He told me,” Ned said. “He was worried he may have offended you.”

“He didn’t.” He shook his head, a grin pulling at the edges of his lips. “I wanted to get an idea of his character.”

“And did you?”

Jon looked over at Ned and nodded. “I believe I did. He is very much like you. You have raised him well.”

“I raised him just as I did my other children,” Ned acknowledged, glancing towards the hearth. “You aren’t the first to tell me how very much like me he is.”

“The Stark blood is very strong in him,” Jon continued, “and from what I’ve seen he is a credit to your House.” He retrieved the letter from where he had hidden it that morning; the one he had been carrying since leaving King’s Landing. “Robert had me draw these papers up and signed it immediately upon receipt of your request.” He tilted the letter so Ned could see the royal seal keeping it tightly shut. “I do believe that Jon Snow is more than worthy of the Stark name and no threat to your other children.” He paused waiting for Ned to meet his eyes again. “But I would ask one question of you before I hand this over.”

He watched as Ned steeled himself, emotions disappearing behind the other man’s solemn northern features.

“Your question?” Ned prompted after a moment, his voice rough.

“Which of your siblings does he truly belong to? Brandon,” Jon leaned forward, “or Lyanna?”

The letter the courier had just delivered from Ned was crumpled in Robert’s fist as the man let out a boisterous laugh. He had been laughing for several minutes now, the small council staring as they waited for their new King to calm.

Lord Eddard Stark had refused to come to the coronation, that much was obvious as it was set to
take place the next day and only a few northern lords and ladies has arrived, along with the courier. It was understandable why Lord Stark’s lady wife, having born a son less than six moons ago, would not have come, but Lord Stark himself, the Warden of the North, had not come either.

“Your grace,” Jon ventured a moment later and Robert just shook his head and shoved the letter towards him. The crumpled parchment slid across the table and he barely caught it before it fell to the floor.

Opening it he tried to smooth the crumpled creases as his eyes scanned the contents. The further he got the higher his eyebrows rose. Confusion and disbelief forefront at his mind.

“The honorable Eddard Stark named his bastard for you Jon!” Robert managed to state, a grin wide on his face. “To think he looked down on my habits and now he has a bastard of his own! Younger than his trueborn heir!” He continued laughing as Jon reread the letter. “The hypocrite!” Robert was still a tad annoyed at his brother in spirit for his words regarding the death of young Rhaenys and little Aegon.

The letter was very succinct, essentially advising that Lord Stark was unable to attend the coronation as he was traveling to Winterfell with his bastard whose mother had left him in his care and he wished to see his firstborn. Apparently, Lord Benjen had also sent word that his elder brother was needed in the North to settle some disputes brought on in the wake of the war.

Jon couldn’t help but think that something was off about the letter, especially when it came to Ned having a bastard. He knew both of his foster sons well having raised them and helped shape them. Robert he had come to expect to have bastards, he was constantly in the presence of whores and beautiful women when not on the battlefield or being forced to attend his duties, but Ned was a different story. He could not envision the young man having partaken outside of his marriage bed, especially bare moons from swearing vows with Lady Catelyn.

That wasn’t his way.

No, Jon was almost positive that this child was not Ned’s. That left two other siblings whose child it could be as Benjen had not left the North: Brandon and Lyanna. Brandon’s reputation was quite known and it wouldn’t surprise Jon if the man had left a bastard or two behind and if Ned was coming from Dorne . . . it was rumored that one of the wolves of the North had lain with Ashara Dayne. Jon doubted it had been Ned. Then again, he had also heard that Lyanna had been taken to Dorne as well. Robert had raved upon it after receiving news of Lyanna’s passing just a sennight earlier.

He stared at the paper in front of him, eyes unseeing.

It didn’t matter either way. Lord Stark was claiming the child as his own, which Jon could only hope that meant no matter his true parentage he looked like a Stark. Either Ned was trying to protect his late brother’s honor or he was saving the life of a nephew that Robert would surely demand the death of. Should it be the latter, Ned would surely keep the child from ever raising arms against his friend. He may never even tell the boy the truth of his birth.

A few well-placed rumors could only help, no matter who the child’s true father was.

“Do not lie to me,” Jon said leaning forward, eyes narrowed. “I practically raised you. I knew you
well back then. For all that Jon Snow looks very much like you, I know your honor would not have allowed you to lay with a woman, especially not with the memory of your marriage so soon before you claim his conception to have taken place.” He met Ned’s gaze fully as the younger man drew his shoulders back. “I have doubted his parentage since I first received word of his birth.”

“And you said nothing?” Ned asked quietly, brow furrowing slightly.

“You claimed him as yours,” Jon replied simply, gesturing with his hand. “If he was Brandon’s then it would have been to spare your lady wife and the North a possible inheritance dispute. If he were Lyanna’s then it would be to spare the child’s life. You weren’t the only one to disagree with how the Targaryen children were treated.” He sighed and leaned back. “I saw no need to intervene.”

“And yet you ask now,” Ned stated, his face settling back into a blank, icy mask.

“You asked for his legitimization.”

“He isn’t a threat.”

“I know,” Jon said, lips quirking into a smile. “Having met and spoken with the boy I can see he cares for his family and not power. Although I have little doubt should his family be threatened that he might use whatever power he can gather to protect them.”

Ned nodded his agreement with that assessment.

“And so, I ask: whose son is he?”

Ned stared past him, over his shoulder toward the window. “What will you do once you know?” he asked finally, eyes sliding over to watch Jon warily.

“I will hand you this letter,” he raised it slightly, “and we will turn our conversation to other topics. Perhaps regarding my son and the possibility of fostering him.”

“He’s young yet,” Ned said, eyebrow-raising.

“And he is spoiled and babied by his mother,” Jon said and pointedly looked at his foster son.

Ned sighed and ran a hand over his face. After several long moments, he spoke, “Lyanna. He’s Lyanna’s.”

Jon nodded slightly to himself. As he had thought. Beneath the Stark coloring and looks, if one were looking carefully, and knew what to look for, the Targaryen ancestry of the boy could be discerned. Jon, as Lord of the Vale, had spent time with the Targaryen’s and knew what to look for. He had also been looking. The features were faint enough and similar enough to the Daynes that one could also claim that he was the son of Ashara Dayne as well. A rumor that had spread far and wide enough that, along with the tales of Lord Stark’s honor, it had clouded the minds of others that might have looked at the boy twice.

“Does Catelyn know?”

The muscle along Ned’s jaw flexed as he nodded sharply. “Yes, I told her recently.”

Ah, Jon thought, no wonder the change of heart.

Jon ‘hmmed and thought for a moment, weighing which question to ask next as he held the letter
for Ned to take.

“Does the boy know?” he asked as Ned took it, staring at the seal for a long moment before standing to place it securely in a lockbox.

“Aye,” he said as he placed the letter away, “he found out.”

“Found out?”

Ned pressed his lips together and glanced at the fire. “He doesn’t burn.”

It took a moment for the meaning to register for Jon and it made him wonder what happened that the boy would have found out such a thing. Was it something small like a candle that should have burned him or something much worse? What injury might the boy have born if he hadn’t inherited that trait? As Ned was remaining silent on the subject, he decided not to press. The dark look on the other man’s face told of a story he did not wish to share.

Jon shifted to fill his cup again, knowing they still had much to talk about. The North had been making waves, small as they were yet in the South the ripples were slowly growing larger. “Now I do not believe the North is rallying behind a dragon-wolf to take the Iron Throne,” he paused to take a sip of the harsh ale, “but you are rallying for something.” Jon swirled his cup for a moment, watching as Ned stilled, shoulders tensing. “Perhaps you might tell me what it is that has you building men and fortifying your coasts, Moat Cailin, and the Night’s Watch. You surely aren’t going to fight Ice Dragons like the last rumor I heard suggested, are you?”

Ned blinked at him, staring for a moment before barking out a laugh at that, shoulders shaking as he continued to laugh.

Unable to help a small grin himself, Jon watched as some of the stress and tension seemed to leave his foster son’s body. It was good to see him laugh, he’d always been so serious and solemn and the years only seemed to have exaggerated those behaviors. He could wait a few minutes for the younger man to calm before steering the conversation back to the serious issues at hand. Perhaps they both needed some light-hearted moments to offset the serious.
Interlude: Robb Part I

Wooden walls were thinner than stone, though the insulation the builders added in many ways helped muffle sound whereas stone often carried it. The walls of Winterfell were thick and tapestries hung throughout—especially in the family wing and where important meetings were held—helping to keep the castle warm and muffle the sound. In the older parts of the castle, the thicker walls held the secrets that Winterfell’s Master builders studied for generations to keep the castle warm. A trade that was seldom heralded outside of certain keeps in the North as, unlike Winterfell, most castles were not built upon hot springs.

When Robb was younger he and his siblings used to listen to the tales Old Nan would spin and ponder if there truly was a dragon hidden deep, deep in the crypts. Perhaps in the lowest levels where carefully shaped, carved, and reinforced stone walls gave way to rough rock caverns and steam filled the air with mist and the musty scent of rotten eggs. After all, she would say, Prince Jacaerys Velaryon’s dragon, Vermax, was said to have worked his way into the crypts, deep and into the lower levels, and laid eggs. Some even said he was behind the collapse of some.

Robb and Jon had tried to explore once, when they were years younger, to find the hidden eggs as perhaps several generations of young Starks before them had, but they never made it very deep. Theon, perhaps wrought with jealousy of Jon being allowed to follow the Stark heir where he could not, had told on them. It had resulted in their father dragging them out and lecturing them on the dangers of the crypts.

If only they had known, they need only go to Aunt Lyanna’s crypt to find a dragon egg. Winter wasn’t one of Vermax’s or so they assumed, for there was no way to know which dragon had laid her egg, but she had been hidden there all the same.

Robb missed the warmth of Winterfell’s walls. He missed the rough stone and the familiarity of the aging tapestries that lined the walls. They would only be in Moat Cailin for another sennight, but he almost wished word would arrive by raven or rider advising that Benjen needed to leave for Castle Black so that he, and Jon, could ride for home.

His brother was growing agitated, little by little, he could tell, at being separated from Winter. Robb couldn’t help but imagine how he would feel if Grey Wind was made to stay so far away for over a moon. The other night he had sat by Jon’s side as his brother warged into her, keeping her from flying south as she had felt his agitation following a run-in with Robb’s aunt.

Grey Wind whined at his side as they walked through the hall. It was long and rooms lined each side. Most in this section were similar in size and built as chambers for visiting highborn. Robb could feel his direwolf’s hunger gnawing at his own stomach and the barely controlled energy zipping through his body. Grey Wind wanted a hunt but now was not the time. Later, Jon and he were planning to practice warging. Then they would run with their companions into the nearby landscape to explore and track whatever prey animal they could find.

Robb had gotten better recently, with the help of his wildling friend, Breck, who had stayed in Winterfell when the others of his party had gone with a group of loyal Stark men to survey the locations his lord father had in mind for some Free Folk clans to settle south of the New Gift, including the Giants. Breck was patient and a better teacher, arguably, than Jon in warging at least. Much to his mother’s concern, Breck spent time with each of the Stark children—save Rickon—to help them learn to control their gifts.

“Are you mad?!” his Aunt Lysa’s voice caused him to wince and freeze in his tracks. It carried
easily through the hall from a room down the way. His Uncle Edmure’s room, if he remembered correctly. “How could you allow such a thing?”

“How could I not?” his mother responded, sounding tired as if she’d already been arguing her point for some time.

He froze as they spoke before his curiosity overrode everything else. Glancing to the side, Robb saw an open doorway just to his right. Motioning for Grey Wind to stay, he stuck his head inside and, after seeing that the room was empty and no personal effects were present, he slipped inside and shut the door behind him. He pressed his back against it and slid down the door until he was sat upon the stained wood of the flooring.

He shut his eyes and reached inside himself for the vibrant connection he shared with his companion, his other half. It took a long moment, but months of practice had made it easier.

The world shifted and suddenly his vision was different. The world was a bit less colorful and bright, or perhaps color just didn’t matter as much as the scent of things. His two-legged mother was still speaking, but it took a moment for him to focus on her words. It took a few long moments for him to force his attention away from the sudden explosion of scents and plod forward in the corridor.

His ears were sharper and he was quieter, able to draw in closer to the voices. A door was slightly ajar, the edges of it not shut and perhaps not quite shaped right for it to close properly. He could see familiar people through the small crack. Robb finally was able to catch up on the conversation following a particularly shrill statement from his aunt as it drew his attention to their speech.

“I hardly know the boy and even I can see he would sooner slit his own throat,” his great uncle, Brynden said, voice a low grumble, “than turn against Robb or the other boys, Lysa.”

“This is a slight against Cat, against our House!” Lysa hissed, he could see her clearer than any other. Her dull, red-brown hair limp in forced curls. She was glaring at each of them in turn, her mouth pressed tight forming deep wrinkles in her skin and what once may have been pretty dimples now made her look worn. She was younger than his mother yet looked much older. “You cannot seriously be considering allowing this atrocity to go forth!”

“Lysa,” his Uncle Edmure spoke then, “while I may not agree that this is right, perhaps you are overreacting? Lord Stark is rebuilding several old holds, including Moat Cailin, and each will need a new lord. Jon appears to care deeply for his siblings and having him as a loyal bannerman holding Queenscrown during this . . . migration of wildlings into the North,” he said that bit as if he were simultaneously disgusted and incredulous, “or even Moat Cailin would be a boon. Especially if Jon’s heir were to marry one of his brother’s children in the future.”

“Why are you so trusting of a bastard’s word?” his aunt said then, voice a hiss. “You know what they are. It’s in their nature to—”

“Lysa!” his mother barked, stepping forward into Grey Wind’s line of sight. “I would hope that someone who had lived for years in the snake pit that is King’s Landing would understand that not all men are made of the same mold. To lump each man of a kind together is true madness!
Would you tout King Robert as being borne from the same mold as the Mad King? Is our Father the same as Lord Tyrell, Tywin, or Stannis? Not all bastards,” she still said the word as if it was distasteful to even form the syllables in her mouth, “are alike either. Some may turn on their siblings, yes, but others stood stalwart, staunchly supporting their trueborn siblings even if it meant their death. Did you learn nothing during your history lessons?” Robb was not unaware of the irony of the statement. It was an argument he had oft thought of using against her, though he'd always held his tongue.

Grey Wind and he moved together without thought, pushing the door open and plodding into the room, startling its occupants.

His mother pressed her lips together as she caught sight, eyes narrowing as she studied his form. Sauntering up to her, he pressed his muzzle into her hand and leaned against her leg. She sighed and tangled her hand in the fur at his nape. It was rare for Grey Wind to allow any to touch him other than Robb and Jon, but Grey Wind would make exceptions. He had never done so for his mother, though, Robb knew.

Their eyes met and she raised an eyebrow before glancing up as Uncle Brynden spoke.

“I cannot say my brother will be happy about it,” the blackfish murmured. He was sitting in a chair near the window, a cup in his hand, the base resting against his thigh. “Your father was incensed when he first heard of the boy’s existence, from what I heard. It would be best if he never lays eyes on the boy.”

His mother glanced at his great uncle and pressed her lips together before nodding sharply in agreement.

“Madness,” his aunt hissed, shaking her head, “utter madness. You're a fool, Cat, if you believe this will turn out well for you and your children.” She turned on her heel and left the room, pulling the door shut with a slam behind her.

There was silence for a few minutes as they heard her heavy footfalls stalk down the hall, likely going off in search of her son.

“By the Seven,” his Uncle Edmure said after a while, breaking the silence, “was she always like this and I just missed it somehow?”

“No, she has changed much since our youth,” his mother ran her hand over his head, scratching lightly behind his ears. “I fear the years in Kings Landing have not been kind to her.”

“Not been kind?” Uncle Brynden snorted. “It seems to have robbed all her kindness away. I daresay, from what I have seen, she lacks heart in her interactions with her own son! I stumbled upon an argument between her and Maester Haburt yesterday as he caught her trying to administer some sort of snake oil remedy to her son! Lord Arryn was not pleased when I sent a servant to retrieve him.”

“Something has twisted within her,” his mother said softly, “I worry for her and for little Robert.”

“Lord Arryn shared with me that he wishes to foster his son with House Stark, should your lord
husband agree,” Edmure said, moving to walk towards the window.

His mother nodded. “I heard.” She sighed, tracing a dark grey spot over his eyes with a finger before continuing. “As much as I hate to take Lysa’s son away from her, I do believe it would be in young Robert’s best interest to be away from her . . . and King’s Landing. For his health if nothing else.”

“Do you think . . .” his uncle trailed off as he looked back towards them. His mother glanced away and the Blackfish stared at his cup.

“Perhaps,” his great uncle said after a moment and the chugged the remainder of his drink. “I wish I could say it wasn’t so, but the accounts given by the maester . . .” he glanced at Edmure. “I think it might be best if you took Lysa home to see her father or at least Riverrun for a time.”

“For how long?” his uncle asked, eyes widening and brow-raising.

“For long enough for Father to get a good look at what she has become,” his mother said, voice dripping with sadness. The scent of the emotion caused him to bury his head into her skirts. She knelt then, wrapping her arms around his body. “I fear it may be best if Lord Arryn were to consider placing her aside. As much as I hate to think it, perhaps it may be best if she were to join the silent sisters.”

“Cat, you cannot be serious!”

Her eyes closed for a moment, chin dipping before she ran her hands through his fur one more time and then stood. “I wish I were not.” She looked down at him then, focusing on his eyes. “Off you go, I’m sure your brother will be looking for you.” He met her narrowed eyes again before standing on all four paws and plodding to the door; she followed in order to open it for him.

As he slipped out she moved to shut the door, but kept it open for a moment, staring at him. He glanced back over his shoulder at her.

“I trust that what we spoke of will be kept silent for the time being?” she asked, standing still. “It would be unkind to get the boy’s hopes up if circumstances were to change.”

Uncle Brynden snorted. “Of course, that was the first thing you asked of us when you dragged us in here earlier, was it not?”

The door shut behind him muffling his mother’s response, but Robb didn’t need to hear anymore.

What he had heard made him smile as he came back to himself, suddenly exhausted. He didn’t even care that this meant he may not be able to run tonight as Grey Wind with Ghost and the other wolves.

They had been talking about Jon being legitimized as a Stark. No matter what Jon might have said, Robb was fully aware that being Stark in name had long been a dream of his brother’s. No matter that he was actually a trueborn Targaryen, Robb had no doubt his brother still dreamed of bearing the Stark name.
Pushing himself up, using the door to support his weight as he readjusted to having only two legs, he pondered sharing the news for a moment and then dismissed it. His mother’s words had clearly been meant for him as she’d somehow known that he has been sharing his direwolf’s skin. He did agree with her, this was something that would better serve as being a surprise to his brother and Robb didn’t want to get his hopes up if something changed between now and when his father planned to announce it.

When he felt strong enough he opened the door to find Grey Wind sitting calmly outside, waiting for him. He smiled down at his companion. Grey Wind’s jaw dropped and lips drew back, tongue lolling out in an approximation of a grin as his tail swept across the floor. His guard, Wildem, stood behind the direwolf and across the hall, an eyebrow raised as he eyed Robb.

Robb smiled sheepishly at him. He had forgotten the man was there.
Inside Winterfell’s warm stone walls, Robb was able to relax. Winterfell was different than anywhere else he had ever been, it had an aura that sunk into his bones and told him he was home. It was comforting, though at the moment he couldn’t help but feel the emptiness as members of his family were not currently present.

Grey Wind stood, nails clicking against stone as he looked up at Robb. The last petitioner for the day had just left and the members of the household that had sat in on the day’s ordeal were beginning to trail out, with the exception of his sworn sword, Wildem, standing behind him and Maester Luwin who sat to his left.

“Thank you Maester Luwin,” Robb smiled as he stood, “I appreciate all of your assistance today. I'm not sure what I would do without you.”

“You would do the right and honorable thing,” the old maester said as he stood, hands disappearing into his long sleeves and he folded them in front of him, “just as your lord father would.”

“Still,” Robb continued as they made their way towards the doors, “your wisdom helped settle several disputes that I was at a loss on how to even begin to resolve.”

“I only helped you find the right path,” the maester smiled, reaching out to settle a hand on Robb’s shoulder. “You made the decisions on your own.”

And he had, as he had been making decisions for over a sennight now regarding Winterfell. Every word he spoke and every decision he made left his fingers quaking when he was alone, worrying over if he had made the right choices. His parents had left him in charge of Winterfell for the first time; Maester Luwin, Ser Rodrik and Vayon Poole left behind to advise him. Vayon was currently checking on the status of the harvest that had stalled much of the construction on the new wall as the men were drafted to bring in the crops as quickly as possible. Aside from him, Bran, Rickon, Theon, and his cousin Robert Arryn, whom everyone had taken to calling Robin in the past several moons, had stayed behind.

While unsurprised after hearing the conversation between his mother and her family, he had been a bit surprised by how different his cousin seemed now from when they had first met. It was a very good difference from what Jon told him; he’d spared an evening to tell Robb of the sickly, foolish, and easily manipulated young man Robin became in most lives.

The boy’s new maester, Haburt, had come North with them as well, at least for the time being, to keep a steady eye on the boy’s supposed fragile health. The northern air seemed to be good for him, along with meeting new faces. While Robin had cried a bit at his separation from his mother he had quickly gotten over it, being distracted by every new thing he saw on their trip to Winterfell. His reaction had been nothing like Lysa Arryn’s wails as her brother and uncle had left with her to visit Lord Tully in Riverrun. From what Robb understood she would be staying there for quite some time.

Lord Arryn had left several days prior in order to speak privately with Robb’s Grandfather before his wife arrived. He wondered if he’d also be gone from Riverrun before her arrival. Considering what Jon had told him, he supposed that would likely be a very good idea.

Robb was glad his cousin was here, his closeness in age with Bran had allowed the two boys to
form a friendship that he hoped someday be akin to what he had with Jon. Robin could near always be found running about with Bran, oft getting into trouble by following his cousin's attempts to climb various buildings in Winterfell. Both of the younger boys were also beginning their training with small, wooden practice swords under Ser Rodrik and the boy's personal guard—a man highly trusted by Lord Arryn—a Ser Lenhard from the Vale.

Maester Luwin made his excuses after a few more moments of conversation as they exited the hall and hurried off to take care of other duties, passing Theon who was waiting a short distance away, eyes hard and lips pressed together.

Robb’s relationship with the Ironborn had once been better than now, but over the past few years, the older boy had begun chafing against the restrictions that had been placed upon him. Each year he petitioned to return home upon his nameday, which had only recently passed. As a man grown, Theon was longing more and more for the home he could scarce remember and he had also begun feeling the few restrictions Lord Stark had placed upon him. Since his mother's change in attitude towards Jon, along with much of the household's, his resentment of Robb's relationship with his brother had grown.

When Theon had found out the truth . . . his displeasure had become greater. Especially as now, like all the Starks, he had a guard that followed him everywhere. His guard, however, was not sworn to him but to House Stark. The guard that tailed Theon was there to mind him. Theon was unable to spend the time he used to at the brothel, either, though that perhaps had more to do with the brothel he used to frequent having shut down a couple years ago; his favorite whores had left winter town for the most part. The remaining whore house didn’t appreciate Theon's attitude, though accepted his coin, and the owner was loyal to the Starks. He often complained that the girls weren’t as pretty—Robb knew he meant exotic—as the girls he used to lay with.

“I have a letter I wish to send,” Theon said, thrusting the pieces of parchment towards him. The muscle in his jaw jumped as glanced over Robb's shoulder towards a tapestry depicting Bran the builder.

Robb took it carefully, opening it to read over the words. He hated having to do this, but Theon wasn't blood family and he wasn't sworn to the Starks. He was, as his father had taken to reminding him time and time again, a hostage from an enemy house that could not fully be trusted no matter how much they may want to. The tales that Jon had to tell of Theon’s actions—even when Jon tried to prevent the darker ones—were testament to that. Still, he did consider Theon a friend and, while they may not be as close as they were once, they still got along well. It was just moments like there where both were reminded of the truth of things

Theon was generally well behaved and a good man, but he always acted harshly when faced with the more open reminders of his station as a ward. Such as having the lord or lady of Winterfell review any letters he sent home. This had been part of the process even before Theon had found out about Winter. Now it was a necessary evil. Balon Greyjoy couldn’t find out about Winter, or Jon, before they were ready. No one could.

“That is a dragon.” Theon’s face was blank, eyes wide as he stared at the little creature on the floor between Robb and Jon. She was half the size of the direwolf pups but seemed larger when she spread her wings. Ghost and Greywind had shifted into a sitting position when the young man had pushed his way into the room, calling for Robb, eyes glaring in his direction.
Robb stared at his friend, shocked. Theon shouldn’t have been in the family quarters at this hour, let alone without permission or an escort. The guard should never have let him pass.

“It is,” Jon said as he stood, stepping in front of Winter who had flared her wings, tail shifting warily behind her.

“How the fuck is there a dragon here?” Theon asked, eyes flitting between Jon and Robb. “Where did you get it?”

They glanced at each other, grey eyes meeting blue, each filled with an edge of panic and worry. His brother was the first to recover, face steeling into an icy mask.

“She hatched,” Jon said simply, voice void of emotion.

Robb glanced at his brother, noticing the minute shaking of his hands, the line of worry creasing his forehead for all he was attempting to keep his face an icy mask. Jon and Theon’s relationship had always generally been frosty, but since the pups had been found . . . since Jon had gained all those memories . . .

“Theron,” Robb said, clearing his throat, as he stood as well. He stared at the older boy, now a man grown, until he met his gaze. Attempting to imitate his father’s demeanor, he asked, voice cool, “What are you doing here?”

“It’s well past your birthday,” Theon answered, voice hollow and still filled with shock, after a moment. His eyes were still locked on Winter. “You’re four and ten, more than old enough to become a man. I had already visited the brothel thrice by the time I was four and ten.” Usually, those words would have been thick with pride, but now they just sounded empty.

Robb had heard the tales time and again, of Theon’s escapades in winter town. If it hadn’t been for his father’s lectures, and his mother’s hard eyes at the sight of Jon when they were younger, Robb might have ventured down to find out what all the fuss was about regarding the embrace of a woman himself by now.

But that was neither here nor there. Theon’s presence in the family wing was a serious break in protocol. He should never have been allowed here. He was a ward, yes, but unlike Jon, he carried not an ounce of Stark blood and had sworn no oaths to keep his foster family’s secrets. The only time he should have been able to come here was in an emergency and even then one would hope that others would arrive first.

“Who let you in the family wing, Theon,” Robb said, anger simmering beneath the calm tone of his voice. “I want a name.”

Theon just stared at him for a long moment and then back down at the dragon.

“Now, Theon,” he barked as Grey Wind began to growl.

“I will give this to Maester Luwin before dinner,” Robb said, pocketing it. “Are you interested in a spar? It’s still a while before dinner.”

Glancing away, Theon nodded sharply, “Of course Lord Stark.”
“Robb,” he said sighing. “We are still friends, are we not?”

Theon didn’t answer for a long moment but turned to meet his eyes. Sometimes Robb wondered exactly what went through his mind and how long would it be until the young man did something like the other versions of Theon that Jon had known. But this Theon wasn’t those men and he could only hope he wouldn’t betray them.

“Yes,” Theon answered finally, “of course we are. It’s just . . .” he sighed, eyes dropping to Grey Wind’s form at Robb’s side.

“I’m sorry if you’ve felt left out,” Robb said, reaching out he laid a hand on Theon’s shoulder. “There’s a lot going on that must be handled within the family.”

“And I’m not family,” Theon muttered bitterly, voice low enough Robb barely caught the words.

“Not by blood, no,” Robb acknowledged before stepping away. He motioned with a jerk of his chin and they began walking, “but we’ve grown up together, Theon. No matter your status you’ve grown up beside me, Jon, Sansa, Arya, Bran, and even Rickon. Family isn’t just about blood . . . and it pains me and my father to have to do things like review your letters. Politics is a tricky thing, though, and for all that you are like a brother to us, you are also my father’s ward.” He stopped and turned to face Theon. “One day you will return to your birth family and you will become Lord Greyjoy of the Iron Islands. You’ll have people to look after just as I will have people here to look after. I hope that I will be able to call you brother on that day and far into the future, but politics dictate that we must be cautious. If I were your father's ward the same steps would be taken and you know it.”

Theon looked away. That was a lie and they both knew it. Theon’s father would never have taken a hostage—had Lord Balon Greyjoy taken Winterfell all the Stark children would have been slaughtered and the castle looted and maybe even burned to the ground.

Sparring with Theon wasn’t as challenging as it used to be, not since Jon had stopped adjusting his skill level when fighting Robb and gotten used to his shorter stature and reach. Robb’s abilities had grown in leaps and bounds beside his brother’s and, after a short time of guilt tinged jealousy, he had developed a drive that made him work harder. It was his goal to match his brother and perhaps truly beat him with the sword one day.

Growing up Robb had been reminded time and time again of his position and, by that same token, Jon’s position within not only Winterfell but the entire noble ranking. Robb had always been proud to be Ned’s heir, eldest son of the Lord of Winterfell, but he had also always been saddened that his boyhood companion, best friend, brother seemed to have no hope to amount to anything in the eyes of the greater realm. Even in the eyes of members of their own house. Had Jon been a trueborn second son things would have been different. He may have been able to have a hold, marry a lady . . . have any number of positions within Robb’s household.

Robb would have allowed him much of that anyway, one day when they were both grown and he became Lord of Winterfell. But that day had always seemed too far off for Jon and his brother had lost hope that such a thing would never happen. He still cringed at the memory of shooting down Jon during play when he decried that he was one of the Lords of Winterfell after Robb announced his own choice of play.
Robb had hated the crestfallen expression that graced his brother’s face, regretting his words near instantly. The sullen attitude that had befallen Jon for the rest of the day, and several days later, had guilt seeping through Robb's bones for weeks. Jon had never been able to escape what Robb believed he saw as his fate. At least, not until fate stepped in.

It was hard to believe that his brother, who still acted very much his equal in age, also had the memories of a man grown and hundreds of lives lived. But Robb trusted Jon and trusted his father. The stories they heard were just too accurate to be anything but the truth.

_Blessed by the Gods_, Robb had said once.

Jon had turned a dark glare on him and bit out, _Cursed by the Gods, you mean._

Robb hadn’t mentioned the Gods having a hand in his situation again, not to Jon anyway.

It had shocked him to learn that Jon was not his brother but his cousin. The details staggering him, but he’d pressed on. No matter who had born him, they were brothers and always would be. No matter what others may think or say Jon was _good_. He was family. He was loved. He deserved to be.
Dinner was a rather quiet affair since Father and Mother had left, Sansa, Arya, and Jon traveling with them. Rickon pouted through the meal, often mumbling questions about when their mother would be back. It would be several moons before most of them would return. They were visiting the major Lords and Ladies along the eastern coast, starting with the Manderly’s in White Harbor. Jon would be gone for at least a few moons as well, traveling to Braavos to visit the Iron Bank much to Robb’s annoyance.

He had wanted to travel with his brother, but Lord Stark had ordered him to remain in Winterfell along with the boys to oversee the castle. It would be a good learning experience; Robb had been told. A chance for him to stand on his own without having the Lordship thrust upon him without any preparation.

There were times he had to push his envy of his brother down deep, but he knew that Jon’s life was not as simple as it had once seemed to be. As a bastard, Jon would have had simultaneously more freedom and fewer options than Robb as heir of Winterfell, but he wasn’t a bastard anymore. Like Robb, he was a trueborn son of a noble house and likely the heir. If the truth of his birth came out the pressure to rally a force to retake the throne would mount and even if he didn’t there would be another pressure—one Robb had felt for years only his was lessened by the knowledge of having four younger siblings—one to find a wife and continue the family name.

There were only two other Targaryens alive as far as they knew, Viserys and Daenerys, and, from what Jon had said, Viserys was a monster as mad as his father had been. Robb wondered if Jon would break his word to their father and arrange the elder Targaryen’s assassination as he had in previous lives. It would surely be easy for him to do while he was in Braavos; he could easily arrange for a faceless man to locate the ‘Beggar King’ and remove him from the world.

“It’s tempting,” Jon said quietly, tapping his quill against the parchment he was writing on. “He’s a cruel man. You can’t even imagine how he treats his own sister . . .” he lifted his eyes to meet Robb’s. “Daenerys is a sweet, gentle young woman but his treatment of her and what happens to her after he . . . sells her to Khal Drogo hardens her. Makes her into a conqueror and a true Queen.”

“But you would change it if you could?” Robb asked, thinking of the stories Jon had told him of Daenerys and her dragons. Of the lives he had traveled the Great Grass Sea with his aunt’s Khalasar.

“I would,” Jon nodded, brow furrowing. “I think . . . but I’m not sure if I should yet.” He looked towards the window. “We have Winter . . . but even with three dragons defeating the Others has always been difficult.” He bit his lip in thought and then sighed, shaking his head. “It would be better to have four.”

“More does sound as if it would be better,” Robb agreed, “in this case at least.” Shifting the papers stacked before him he looked through the notes of various lives Jon had lived, reading over the actions Jon had taken and what he believed the consequences of each were. “Could she not hatch at least one without the sacrifice bit?”
"I don’t think so," Jon said slowly, glancing up at him. “At least I have never seen it happen. Either the dragons hatched upon Khal Drogo’s funeral pyre or they hatched upon Viserys’. As far as I know, it only happened upon Viserys’ one time and I was there for it.”

“But you did?”

“The egg was given to me as a babe,” Jon bit his lip as he shuffled through a few sheets of notes. “I think that might be why it was so easy for me to hatch it. That or perhaps Winterfell and the crypts have some amount of magic in it that helped as well.” He shook his head. “I don’t think they had an egg to lay in her crib when she was born and if they did it is likely still on Dragonstone. Maybe . . .” he paused, picking up his quill again, "maybe she could have managed one."

"But that would leave us down one dragon."

Jon nodded. "It would."

They fell back into a comfortable silence as they arranged the notes and rewrote them where needed. Jon’s writing had been sloppy when he’d first written some of them, shaking with emotions as he first relived the memories. The quiet was only broken a few times by Robb asking clarifying questions about what he or their father had written.

Jon had a relatively high opinion of his aunt, Robb knew, and painted a pretty picture of a beautiful woman who walked through fire—literally and figuratively—and come out the better for it. Though there were times he frowned as he described decisions she made and actions she took, as if looking back at now, so far removed, they had begun to take on a different light.

“What will you do when she comes to Westeros?” Robb asked a while later.

“I don’t know.”

Robb raised an eyebrow. “You don’t know?”

“Daenerys can be stubborn,” Jon smiled slightly, “and she will not want to set aside the dream of regaining the Iron Throne. I will not let her destroy our family though, Robb. I may be a Targaryen, but I am a Stark first. If she or even if Aegon comes for the throne . . . it will depend on the dynamics of power in the kingdom.”

If the Lannisters ended up in power, Robb knew that Jon wouldn’t hesitate to support Daenerys or Aegon. If Robert was on the throne still . . . well therein lay the conundrum. Their father wouldn’t abandon his loyalty to his foster brother unless their House or the North was threatened.

Robb wasn’t sure where his lord father would lay their loyalties if Prince Joffrey ascended to the throne. Not after the tales Jon told them.

“I will do what is best for our family and what is best for the North,” Robb said softly after a while, setting down his quill.

Jon smiled, glancing up at him. “As will I.” Grey eyes dropped to stare at the pages before him. “I think you’d like her,” he said after a long moment.

“Daenerys?”

“Yes.”

“Did we ever meet?” Robb was genuinely curious, he hadn't come across any notes that told of
him living long enough to treat with the Dragon Queen as yet.

“A few times.” Jon ducked his head, attempting to hide behind his dark curls.

Robb narrowed his eyes as Jon didn’t continue speaking. “Is this one of the times you’re going to refuse to tell me more . . . like the time I asked about my marriage to Margaery Tyrell?”

He had seen the notes on that life, much to Jon’s annoyance, but his brother had declined to give him any more information on the subject.

Jon glanced up at him, grey eyes shining with mirth and lips quirked in a grin.

“All right,” Robb shoved his chair back from the table, nearly knocking over a pot of ink, “that’s enough of this for the day. You and me, in the practice ring, ten minutes.”

“Lord Robb—”

“Robb,” Robb corrected his cousin quickly.

“Robb.” Robin Arryn smiled as he poked at his food with his fork, pushing it around his plate. “Bran says you’re an excellent horseman.”

“I am more than decent riding a horse,” Robb said, a grin quirking his lips which he hid behind his glass as he sipped from it.

His cousin bit his lip and glanced Bran’s way before taking a deep breath to muster up his courage. “Mother never let me ride a horse. I always had to ride with her,” he said gaze falling to his plate. “I was wondering if, perhaps, you might teach me—me and Bran—the basics?”

Robb watched them for a long moment, trying to emulate how his father would have responded to such a request. When Robin’s fingers began to fidget he finally broke his silence. “I suppose,” he said and then waited for his cousin to look up at him before continuing. “If Maester Haburt says it is okay and the weather is clear I don’t see why we couldn’t go over the basics tomorrow morning.”

Both boys grinned widely at him, showing off their gap-toothed smiles.

“If you promise me that there will be no more climbing of the castle walls,” he stared pointedly at them until their faces adopted a sheepish expression and they nodded violently. “Well then, Robin, first thing tomorrow visit your maester and I will meet with him after.”

The boys wouldn’t stop talking of their plans for the next morning and which horse they would ride for the rest of the meal; Robb excused himself after he was done and made his way to the Godswood, his guard for the evening, Wildem, shadowing him a few paces back.

The clearing was quiet and he stopped to light a few torches on his way to the Heart Tree, the glow reflecting off the pond. Grey Wind had appeared at his side as they entered the wood, his yellow eyes shining in the torchlight. He’d been hunting with Summer and Shaggydog much of the day. They were all so large now, though the mother wolf was still at least a quarter taller.

As Robb knelt before the tree, Grey Wind lay down next to him, his side pressing against Robb’s
thigh. He prayed to the Gods for guidance, for his family to be safe, and for the North’s preparations not to be in vain. Lastly, he prayed that Jon would make the right choices and not do anything stupid while on his journey—that his brother would return to them safe and sound with Ghost at his side and Winter flying in the skies above him.

He prayed that in this world they would have a happy ending.
Late Summer Part I

“Sometimes there is no happy choice, Sam, only one less grievous than the others.”
Jon Snow

The ocean was fairly calm today, the prevailing winds taking their ship in a slight north-easterly direction straight towards their destination. The vessel he was on was one of Lord Manderly’s personal ships, one of the largest, fastest, and best equipped. The ship was captained by one of his most loyal men and crewed by northern men and Stark loyalists. Jon had come alone, his family remaining in the North while he made this trip. His father had assigned him a guard, however, in the form of Luca and several other of the best-trained guardsmen. Ghost was at his side as well, and Winter had taken to coming and going during their trip, as large as she was now she had little difficult flying back and forth between the ship and land, even though Jon didn’t much like the idea of it. But everyone among the crew was trustworthy and had all sworn oaths to the Starks—to serve Jon and to keep Winter’s existence quiet.

Winter was much larger now, the size of a workhorse—if one didn't count her wings, tail, and neck —and growing bigger every day. Jon wouldn’t be surprised if by the time they returned to Westeros he’d be able to ride her. He’d been too nervous to attempt it yet, not wanting her to falter under his weight. She had flown ahead of them last night, towards the less occupied areas of Essos near Braavos and he’d flown with her in his dreams, watching through her eyes as she explored.

Taking this trip had been a tough decision, discussed hotly between Lord Stark, Robb, and even Lady Catelyn eventually. A member of the Stark family had to be the one to deal with this, however, no one else could be trusted and Jon was currently the best choice.

Ned had been needed in the North, the continuing projects had some of the bannermen anxious in addition to the trickle of free folk migrating south of the Wall and settling in the Gift, New Gift, and other regions. Already a few skirmishes had broken out, mostly on the eastern side of Queenscrown and so, after seeing Jon off in White Harbor, Ned had begun a trek across the North to visit the most unnerved houses at the change. It was also simply better that the Warden of the North stay in the North with his family, which had been Jon’s main argument for his father to stay behind.

He was afraid that should his father leave he would never return home again; Jon could count on one hand the number of times, upon reaching Kings Landing, Lord Stark had made it home to the North. Robb also had tried to insist on coming, but his status as heir to Winterfell had made it necessary that he stay home while Lord Stark visited the bannermen, especially as the Bolton’s were among those that Ned planned to dine with. Jon had gritted his teeth upon hearing that Sansa and Arya would be traveling with his father and Lady Catelyn, making sure to remind both of them of how dangerous Ramsay Snow was. Lady Catelyn's dark eyes and pursed lips had told him how seriously she was taking it. The girl's guards had also gotten an earful from him—they had seemed more amused than anything at his lecture but he trusted they’d taken him seriously.

The North had to at least appear to be arranging a loan from the Iron Bank, it wouldn’t do them any good to let the South know that the austere living of the North wasn’t indicative of their true wealth. Besides, the contract Jon carried with him was another source of wealth and one that would aid them greatly in their preparations.

Since Ned and Robb couldn’t go and Lady Catelyn did not wish to leave her children for such a
long time, it had been decided that Jon would be the only one to go much to his father’s
disconceration. Jon had been to Braavos in his past lives, however, usually alone which gave him
experience to draw on that Robb and even his father wouldn’t have.

He also now had a name to back the claims he made.

Jon grinned, adjusting his grip on the rope and checking his footing as he remembered his last
name day.

Robb had been the one to wake him, early enough that the sun was still hidden beyond the horizon,
the night sky only just beginning to shift to the grey tones of pre-dawn.

Jon blinked the sleep from his eyes and frowned. “Robb?”

His brother was grinning at him, smiling as if he hadn’t just interrupted Jon’s sleep on a day he had
known that his plan’s included sleeping past breakfast.

“Come on,” Robb said, pulling Jon’s furs back and letting the cool air find Jon’s sleep warm form
—clad only in his small clothes. “Get dressed,” he said, crossing the room to rifle through Jon’s
clothes.

Jon glared as he tried to muffle a yawn, shifting his legs over the side of the bed. “What’s going
on?”

Robb shrugged, refusing to meet his eyes as he examined Jon’s clothes. After a moment, he tossed
Jon one of his nicer pair of breaches. “Father said to wake you up. We’re to meet him in the
Godswood.”

“He didn’t say why?” Jon asked as he pulled the pants over his hips.

“Just said to hurry.” He scowled at two different tunics before throwing one onto Jon’s bed.

Raising an eyebrow, Jon pulled it over his head in time to catch his nicest leather jerkin which had
been on a collision course for his face. A moment later Robb was manhandling him to force it over
his head and tie it securely from the back.

“Did father tell you to dress me in my finest clothes as well?” Jon asked, looking over his shoulder
at his brother.

“No,” Robb answered, a grin tilting his lips as he finished securing the ties. He motioned for Jon to
sort the rest of his outfit out as he went to grab Jon a pair of boots.

“But someone did.”

Robb grinned wider, still keeping his silence on the matter, as he turned around to present the
boots, suspiciously cleaner than Jon last remembered them being, to him. “Put your boots and
cloak on,” Rob said as Jon took them from him. He moved to the door then and Jon caught sight of
Grey Wind and Ghost sitting together in the hall.

As he pulled on his boots, Jon eyed his direwolf companion, meeting the bright red eyes he felt a
hint of mischievousness beneath the surface. The wolf had been aware of Robb’s presence from
before he’d entered the room and done nothing to wake his human.
“Traitor,” he muttered under his breath as he stood. Ghost’s ear flicked, but otherwise, he just continued to watch Jon silently.

Robb met him in the hall, his own cloak secured over his shoulders, an unlit torch in his hand. Ghost and Grey Wind followed at their heels, silent but for the occasional click of Grey Wind’s claws on the flooring, as they made their way through the castle halls. The two guards that were trailing them stayed back a few paces, following them just as quietly.

“Father didn’t say anything about what this is about?” Jon asked skeptically, watching as Robb lit his torch at the last sconce before entryway.

“Father just said to retrieve you and meet in the Godswood,” Robb answered him as they pushed open the door.

Jon watched his brother as they walked, eyes narrowing, “And what did your mother say?”

Robb shrugged, grin widening. “Mother said to make sure you were presentable.”

“And?”

“And that is all she said,” Robb replied, pressing his lips together tightly, as they crossed the nearly empty courtyard. Across the ways near the barn, one of the stable boys was checking a horse from a recently returned member of the guard while another guard was holding the reins of his own horse and speaking quietly with the lad. A few servants went about their business as well; one young woman carried what looked to be a basket of fresh eggs towards the kitchens.

As the edge of the Godswood came into view, Robb stopped him with a hand on his arm. “Call Winter. I have a feeling you’ll want her here.”

“And you still don’t know anything?”

Robb shook his head. “Just a hunch,” he insisted, lips pressing even tighter together, attempting to hide a grin. It was obvious he knew more than he was letting on.

Jon had a feeling Robb had a very good idea of what was going—he was just unwilling to share it. He eyed his brother for a long moment before sighing and nodding. Eyes sliding shut he reached out across the mental bond he shared with his companions.

Winter spent much of her time flying in the deeper portions of the Wolfswood at night, usually returning to the castle before first light. She was growing large now and could no longer fit in Jon’s window. She had surpassed Ghost in the size of her body and her growth was continuing just as fast, even as Ghost himself was still growing. She stayed during the day in a portion of the broken tower, an entryway having been widened for her use. It wouldn’t last too terribly long, but it gave them time to begin construction on another barn and perhaps what may eventually amount to a small dragon’s pit.

Jon had been somewhat shocked at the sheer level of construction that had begun across the North, but especially at Winterfell, Moat Cailin, and Queenscrown in the past several years. While he knew it had to be placing a strain on the North’s coffers—even considering the saved wealth hidden in the crypts—it was also leading to an increase in jobs for the small folk. In turn that was leading to more craftsmen and others selling their wares in the markets as well. More taxes were also being collected as a result.

Economically it seemed as if it was good for the people at the very least. Very few of the bannerman had contacted Lord Stark to voice complaints and those that had were then invited to
Winterfell to speak with their liege lord on the matter. Most of the complaints, though not all, tended to center on the migration of Free Folk trickling into the North proper.

As they reached the clearing at the center of the Godswood, the guards split off from them, staying behind in the woods. There were torches set near the heart tree and a few forming a trail towards it. As they stepped into the clearing Winter landed nearby, the light breeze formed by her wings disturbing the flames of the torches and bending them this way and that.

Jon smiled tiredly at her as she crept towards him. Reaching a hand out he waited until she bumped her muzzle against it before sliding his hand over her brow, fingers caressing the rough scales at the back of her head and bumps that were the beginning of spines along her backbone. She leaned into the touch letting out a purring-chuff noise.

“Jon!” Arya called and was promptly shushed by Sansa’s voice.

Robb had continued past him, joining his siblings in a line near the Heart Tree. The direwolves were all wandering around, circling the tree, or laying behind them, their eyes turned like the humans toward Jon.

He chewed at the inside of his cheek as he surveyed his family. Everyone was dressed in their finest—or nearly finest—garb. His father stood immediately in front of the Heart Tree, Lady Catelyn at his side holding a sleepy-eyed Rickon.

Winter bumped her head against his elbow, having moved to stand behind him, her warm breath tickling his skin through his clothes. Ghost stepped forward a few paces from his side, moving towards the Heart Tree before glancing back at him, red eyes glowing in the slowly increasing light of early morning.

Swallowing, he paced forward until he was even with Ghost, his hand reaching out to tangle in thick white fur.

“Who comes before the Old Gods and before House Stark?” his father’s voice rang out in the near silence.

“J-Jon Snow,” he paused for a moment eyes meeting his father’s. Lord Stark nodded at him, prompting him to continue, “Jaehaerys Tar-Targaryen of Houses Stark and Targaryen.”

“Jon Snow, Jaehaerys Targaryen, I Eddard Stark, head of House Stark, Lord of Winterfell, Warden of the North, and descendant of the Kings of the North, of Winter, bid you to come forward.”

Jon took a shuddering breath and did so, not stopping until he stood before his father and the Heart Tree. Ghost stopped a pace back, sitting to Jon’s left as his family stood to his right.

“Kneel,” Lord Stark said and Jon did, looking up at his father where he stood next to the crying face of the tree. The red sap glittered a bit as the first rays of sunrise caught it.

His world was off-kilter; Jon felt as if he was stuck in a dream, his gut-churning and fluttering with a thousand butterflies as he dreaded the moment he would awaken. Winter chuffed nearby as she came to a stop a little way off to his left, perching on her hind legs.

“To the realm, you bear the name Snow, the name of bastards born of the North,” Lord Stark spoke, his voice quiet but firm. “A trueborn child of House Targaryen, but a bastard of House Stark in the eyes of the world. You have been a credit to your Houses since the day you were born.” a small smile pulled at the corner of his father’s lips and his grey eyes softened. Jon’s eyes caught on a piece of parchment in his father’s hand, the broken seal of the royal house of Baratheon visible in
the wax. “In the eyes of the Old Gods, and the New, and before your family, members of your mother, Lyanna Stark’s, House, I, head of House Stark, offer you adoption fully into House Stark, enabling you to carry the Stark name in the eyes of the realm with as much right as you would have to carry your birth father’s name.”

Jon’s was breathing heavily, his hands shaking, as his father—uncle—spoke. His mind caught on every word, taking seconds to process the entirety of the words strung together. He had dreamed of this moment for as long as he could remember. Longer even.

“Do you accept your place among House Stark with all the rights and all the duties that come with being a full member of your mother’s House?” Lord Stark asked.

His mouth was dry, and he swallowed heavily, attempting to wet his throat before speaking. “I, Jon—Jaehaerys—so accept and swear upon the Old Gods, and the New, that I will uphold the honor and traditions of House Stark. That I will do everything within my power to be worthy of the honor bestowed upon me.”

“You’ve always been worthy,” Robb murmured, his voice barely carrying to him.

Lord Stark’s eyes darted to his eldest causing him to shift his gaze away for a moment.

“Rise, Jaehaerys, Jon Stark, of House Stark and House Targaryen and greet your family on this, your first day as a full member of House Stark.” Lord Stark reached his arm out to Jon and he took it, clasping his father’s arm as he was pulled to his feet.

Jon barely managed to get to his feet before Robb’s arms were around his shoulder and Arya’s around his waist as she pushed between them. Sansa and Bran joined them moments later, Sansa hesitating only mere seconds before she was hugging Jon.

The direwolves howled then, their call carrying into the early morning and echoing across the hills. Winter, not wanting to be left out of the celebration, rose up on her hind legs fully, wings flaring out and let out of puff of fire over the pond, avoiding the branches of the Heart Tree. As the howl tapered off Ghost and Grey Wind bounded over to her, both requesting a tussle with their friend.

Jon grinned at them and at his family, blinking back the moisture in his eyes as his father wrapped him in a hug and Sansa began talking about the early meal the cooks had prepared for them to break their fast in the background. Jon pulled back and smiled up at his father.

“Thank you,” he managed to say. This was something he had always wanted, in the manner in which he had always wanted it. To be allowed to bear the Stark name, surrounded by his family, those that he cared about, and to have the rite done before Winterfell’s Heart Tree.

The sky was coloring above them as his father cupped the back of his head and, in a gesture he’d not done for years, Ned pressed a kiss to the crown of Jon’s dark curls.

“I’m sorry it took so long,” he murmured and then stepped back to allow his lady wife to greet Jon, Rickon holding his arms out towards his brother, asking to be held.

Jon smiled at his aunt, ducking his head as she smiled warily at him, handing her youngest over to him.

“I’m sorry as well,” she said softly, cupping his elbow with her hand.

He shook his head at her but didn’t voice the words he knew she already understood. It had never been her fault, not truly, for he couldn’t fault her for not wanting to risk her children’s status. No
matter how else she had treated him. And though he may not ever be able to fully forgive her or forget, he could understand.

“Jon!” Rickon mumbled in his ear, pressing a sloppy kiss against Jon’s cheek. “Jon Sta’k.”

“Thank you, lil’red,” Jon smiled down at the boy and pressed a kiss against his forehead, causing the boy to blink and furrow his brow.

Rickon blinked at him, glancing around at his siblings who were all standing about grinning, their direwolves at their sides. His eyes caught on his own wolf, slightly smaller than the others—though Jon knew he’d one day be as big if not bigger than Grey Wind when full-grown—standing between Lady and Summer. “Shaggydog!” He leaned over in Jon’s arms, reaching out and down, causing Jon to have to shift the boy in his arms.

“Well,” Robb laughed, “I guess just it’s official no Stark is more important than Shaggydog to him.”

Rickon blinked at them all as everyone began to laugh, he looked back up at Jon confused. “Put me down, Jon? Play with Shaggydog?”

“After breakfast,” Catelyn said, taking the boy from Jon, trying to hold back her own laughter, “there’ll be plenty of time in a few hours.”

Rickon scowled a bit but pressed his face against her neck, still slightly sleepy for the early hour as Catelyn had been careful to arrange his sleeping schedule so he was not generally awake before dawn.

Jon smiled as he fell into step with Robb, his brother wrapping an arm around his shoulders grinning and whispering in his ear various plans for the future and what he’d do if anyone dared call Jon a bastard again. Wind from Winter’s wings tousled their hair as she leapt into the air, heading for the broken tower, leaving Grey Wind and Ghost to run after her tail for a few short moments, jumping after her before they hurried after their humans.

Jon Stark.

It was a name he rarely heard and had never been given by his father.
Late Summer Part II

Jon had been legitimized in previous lives as a Stark, but never in front of a Heart Tree and never in front of more than two members of his family at a time. It had always been bittersweet and never seemed to work out well in the end.

The first life in which he had been legitimized had been arguably the worst experience. While it was usually Robb that proclaimed him a Stark, the first time it had been, of all people, King Joffrey.

It had been difficult to convince his father to take him along with his sisters south to Kings Landing; the look on his father when he had ridden out of Winterfell’s gate beside him had been filled with barely concealed pain and worry. Jon had somehow managed to convince Lady Catelyn to insist he go, swearing an oath to protect the girls with his life. Like his father, she had looked physically pained upon agreeing and hours later his father had told him to pack—not for the Wall, but for Kings Landing—fury simmering in eyes.

In the end traveling south hadn’t allowed him to save his father, but it had allowed him to get Arya out of Kings Landing safely, a Stark guard and Gendry at her side, and eventually, he’d received word that she’d joined Robb at Riverrun. Jon, though, had been stuck in King’s Landing warring with his emotions as he tailed faithfully behind an immature Sansa who had little understanding of the consequences of her actions. She was learning, though, slowly but surely. The awestruck, dazzled expression she’d once stared upon her golden prince with was more forced now, sliding away from her features when she thought no one was watching.

His father hadn’t lost his head, true, but he’d been poisoned in the dungeon. An act Jon was sure could be laid at the feet of Lord Baelish no matter what false trails were laid for men investigating the act.

The poisoning and Arya’s escape, however, had ironically placed Jon out of harm’s way. King Joffrey had been convinced by his mother to take actions to try and appease the North. Killing even one of the two remaining hostages would have done no such thing. Everyone knew that Lord Robb Stark cared for his bastard brother as much as any of his trueborn siblings.

But, Robb had still rebelled, helped along by rumors that had spread throughout the Kingdom that the Lannisters had been the one to murder Lord Stark in the black cells. Again, Jon was sure the rumors had been started by Baelish. The man’s greasy fingers had found their way into every marriage between the High Houses now. His whispers seeped into even the most stubborn, self-serving, and conniving ears. His hands were helping along a dozen parallel plans, political machinations, backup plan upon back up plan.

Jon wanted nothing more than to just drive his sword through the weasel’s heart but had learned life and again that did not mean things would turn out well for him or the rest of his family. Not with so many of the man’s manipulations already in process.

“You saved my life, Snow,” Joffrey stared up at him, just as shocked as Jon himself was.

The boy’s kingsguard, down by one, had reformed around their King, members of the city guard pouring into the alley.

The sword Jon had snatched from the fallen kingsguard was still buried in the back of the would-be assassin, the blade covered in blood, skin, and other bits where it protruded out towards the boy
king. Jon met his eyes, grey to wide green. There hadn’t been much of a choice, in truth, had Jon not acted blame could have been laid upon him and Sansa. They would have been dead, likely at the order of the queen.

Jon reached out, grasped the shoulder of the dead man and stepped back, freeing the sword from the carcass. The body fell to the cobblestones with a wet smack and Jon stared at it before dropping the sword to the ground, letting it clatter aside.

“Jon,” Sansa’s voice was a whisper behind him. Until the moment he’d snatched the sword to kill the man he’d been covering her, fighting with his fists and feet to keep her from harm. Her hand clenched in the back of his tunic and he could practically feel her weigh her next words.

Looking at her over his shoulder, he met her blue eyes for a split second, seeing the fear and worry for him plain as day before the mask she’d taken to since their father’s death slammed down and she rushed forward, fingers brushing against his as she hurried past.

“Your grace! King Joffrey, my love!” She called sweetly, worry and fear coloring the tone of her voice and painting across her face. “When I saw that evil man run at you . . . I was so worried!”

Joffrey slapped her hands away and hurried to stand. She backed up a step, wringing her hands together as he brushed away one of the kingsguard’s attempts to assist him. “I am fine, my lady.” Joffrey’s eyes darted to Jon. “It appears I have your brother to thank, in part.” He turned a scowl to the kingsguard lying limp nearby, a knife piercing deep into the man’s right eye.

Joffrey paused for a moment then glanced up at Jon, eyes narrowed. “Perhaps my late father was correct about the loyalty of you Starks. At least in your bastard brother’s case,” he said and then let out a sharp laugh. “They say he has the true look of a Stark, after all, unlike your trueborn brothers.”

“Your grace,” a guard said from his shoulder, “we should return to the keep as swiftly as possible.”

“Yes,” Joffrey agreed, still staring at Jon, “and we shall. And,” he paused for a moment, sucking his bottom lip between pale white teeth, “a feast will be prepared with utmost haste.” A proud grin spread across his face. “Tonight we will celebrate for by my word you, Jon Snow, will become Jon Stark, Lord of Winterfell. Once my armies route your traitorous half-brother and take the North you shall sit in the high chair of Winterfell’s great hall as its lord.” He glanced towards his mother who was staring, eyes dark with fury at her son. “Of course, we’ll have to find you a suitable bride. We can’t leave the North without heirs for long,” he leered a bit, “perhaps your firstborn can grow up with its cousins here in Kings Landing.” Joffrey reached out and took one of Sansa’s hands. “Would you like that, my lady?”

“Oh yes, your grace,” Sansa smiled sweetly at him, eyes darting to Jon's before returning to the King, she clasped his hand back. “It would be so sweet for our beautiful children to grow up with a cousin by their side!”

A hostage, Jon knew, like Theon had grown up as in the North. His insides were crawling with rage that he had to stamp down. His stomach churned and he was glad he had not eaten for hours.

“Would you like that, bastard?” Joffrey looked back to him, eyebrow raised and chin lifted in challenge. “To be Lord to Winterfell and Warden of the North?”
Jon glanced at Sansa who stared back at him, eyes not giving anything away. He dropped suddenly to his knee and stared at the ground, unable to trust himself to keep his true emotions hidden. “Aye, your grace, I would. You would honor me with this act . . . I would be forever in your debt.”

At that Joffrey laughed with delight again and began to repeat suggestions made by his guard and mother as if they were orders originating from his very mind.

Jon glanced up before he stood and he met Sansa’s gaze for a brief moment. She was biting her lip as Joffrey ignored her presence, worry etched on her features. She knew, like he, that his acceptance—even if he truly had no choice—would be seen as a betrayal in the eyes of the North. If Robb lost this war and Jon was installed as Lord of Winterfell none of the northern lords would trust him.

If Robb won . . . then Jon would be known as a traitor and there was a chance he would lose his head or be sentenced to the black.

Jon doubted he’d ever hated himself as much in any of his dozens of lives as he did at that moment.

Sansa tried to force a smile on her lips for him as tears pricked her eyes and he stood. She, too, could be seen as a traitor. And, if she did end up marrying the bastard king . . . he pressed his lips together as he moved to fall in step at her side. They were in this together, for better or for worse. They didn’t have a choice.

Perhaps he should have just let the bastard die.

Jon dropped to the deck of the ship, arms aching and sweat staining his worn tunic. Less than a week into the trip he began assisting the crew, the work helping to distract his mind. Assisting with the rigging was the best distraction of all, his entire focus had to be on the job when he was climbing.

“Lord Stark,” Luca called to him, his voice taut. The man’s nerves were always on edge when Jon was working the rigging, likely afraid he would fall or become injured where he could do nothing to prevent it.

He glanced at his guard. Originally assigned to be his guard and shadow by his father during their trip to the Wall, Luca had chosen to become his sworn sword taking the oath the afternoon of Jon’s fifteenth name day, swearing his service to Jon Stark, Jaehaerys Targaryen. Luca had been tailing him, performing the duties for over a year prior to giving his oath, the actual swearing had been but a formality.

“Yes, Luca?” Jon asked, swiping the back of his hand over his forehead.

“The captain believes we will be arriving in Braavos tomorrow, early,” he reported, watching as Jon accepted a ladle of water from the cabin boy. “Perhaps not long after sunrise.”

“Good,” Jon said after thanking the little boy—a relative of the ship’s captain, a Ser Gerik who had served House Manderly for decades—ruffling his hair before he moved to offer a drink to other members of the crew. He glanced down at himself and sighed, grimacing. “I suppose I ought to get cleaned up.” His hair was tied back and slick with sweat, the clothes he wore stained.

“Might be a good idea, my lord,” Luca agreed, moving to stay in step with Jon as they headed for
the cabins. “While you may smell a great deal better than some of the crew,” he tried and failed to
surprise a grin, “I daresay the bankers would be appreciative if you took a bath.”

Jon laughed as he tugged the tie from his curls. “We certainly don’t want to offend the bankers,” he
said as he ran a hand through his sweat damped locks, rubbing quickly at the back of his head to
loosen them.

Truly he didn’t. The Iron Bank of Braavos was a powerful institution, dangerous whether you were
on their good or their bad side. No one wanted to be on their bad side.

In more than one life they had approached Jon or members of his family, usually when he was in
the North, offering to fund a campaign against the Iron Throne. One very memorable time they had
backed the mummer Aegon, buying off more sellsword companies than Jon had known existed,
convincing them to work together to take over the whole of Westeros. The only notable refusal had
been the Company of Roses. During that life Jon had fled North to the Wall, attempting to gather as
many forces to hold back the White Walkers.

The mummer had taken the throne moons before the Wall fell, ignored the letters sent from the
Watch, and had parceled off parts of his enemy’s land to those the Iron Bank dictated. The
sellswords had fled back to Essos when Wights began to wander down the neck and not long before
Jon died he’d heard the young King had followed the Golden Company to warmer lands as well,
abandoning the kingdom he’d practically burned to the ground during his conquest.

“Haig has prepared a bath for you,” Luca said before he opened the door to the cabin, eyes
glancing about the room before he moved to allow Jon in. “Although I daresay it may be a tad
cold, my lord.”

Ghost was the only one in the room and he looked up from the bed when they entered. He was too
large now to share the bed with Jon at night, but quite gladly spent hours curled in Jon’s furs
shedding upon them during daylight hours when the sun was high and beating harshly across the
deck of the ship.

“A cold bath is fine,” Jon quirked a grin, “perhaps not the most pleasant of experiences, but I am a
Stark. I’ll survive.”

“I am sure you will, my lord.” Luca turned back to the door, suppressing a chuckle. “Do you want
me to send Haig to you?”

“No.” Jon shook his head as he crossed the room to the trunk where his belongings were stored. “I
will be fine for now.” He wouldn’t have need of assistance dressing, or undressing, today. Perhaps
tomorrow, when he donned his finery to meet with the bank’s representatives. Until then he didn’t
have need of assistance from his steward. “Thank you, Luca.”

Luca nodded and exited the room, shutting the door behind him. Without a doubt, he now stood
sentinel on the other side. The man took his duty very seriously, even on a ship surrounded by
staunch Stark loyalists.

Jon sighed as he unlocked the chest, staring down at the contents carefully folded and stowed away
within. Luca wasn’t his only guard; there were six Stark guards on the trip with him and other men
among the crew trained and able to take up arms if need be. Of his guards, two others had also
sworn oaths to Jon personally—a tall, stocky dark-haired man who was clearly of Northern descent
named Gomer and a shorter, leaner, extremely agile man named Kyne with ash blonde hair and
brown eyes who’d been born in winter town to a whore—and they, like Luca, were the only ones
who Lord Stark had personally confirmed Jon’s lineage to. All three had been among the guard
since they were old enough to apprentice, serving in whatever capacity they could, and had served House Stark faithfully since their youth. Kyne was the youngest at nine and ten.

His father had insisted on the need for more than just Luca to act as his guard on this voyage. Traveling to a foreign land Ghost wouldn’t always be able to be present and Winter, too, would have to stay farther away than normal while he visited the port city. Just yesterday he’d sent her off to explore Essos, pleading with her to stay out of sight to the best of her abilities.

Thinking twice before he touched the clothes, he stared at his hands. A surprising amount of dirt and grease was stuck in the creases of his knuckles and beneath his nails. Standing, Jon pulled his sweat-soaked and salt-encrusted shirt over his head and dropped it to the floor, kicking off his boots and then his breaches before removing his smallclothes as well.

The basin was placed near his desk and the water not nearly as cold as Luca implied it would be. He wondered how many trips Haig had made between the kitchen and cabin to heat this much water.

The young man, a son of a man who had once served Jon’s late uncle and later worked in the family wing of Winterfell and a woman who assisted the head cook, was happy to tell anyone that asked his family had served House Stark faithfully for six generations now. He also was in a not so secret relationship with the young servant girl Gwelda. Only two years Jon’s senior, Haig was already thinking of having a son or daughter that would one day swear into service of either Jon’s children or one of his siblings’ children.

Jon smiled at the memory of the goodbye he’d caught them sharing, mind wandering to goodbye’s he’d shared with various people during his past lives; Ygritte, Val, Margaery . . . half a dozen more women. Gods he even missed Waella sometimes. He felt a flush creep up his neck, body heating, and he stepped into the basin quickly, forcing his mind away to other avenues.

Sliding into the water he sighed, sinking as far down as he could. He let his body settle as dead weight until his feet touched the far side of the basin and his knees peeked out inches above the water’s surface. After soaking for a time, he pushed himself up and reached over the side, snatching the handily placed soap and a small, clean rag. The soap smelled of spices and lavender, a gift from Sansa before he’d left White Harbor and, perhaps, a not so subtle hint after a long trip where he had seldom bathed and often trained hard in the evenings.

As he washed himself, being sure to reach every inch of skin, he took stock of his body. He had a few scars, of course, and quite a few bruises from work and training. It still shocked him, sometimes, the missing scars that had once been cut into his skin. He couldn’t remember a life his skin had been so clean, lacking slashes, stabs, and other scars crisscrossing his skin. Sometimes he gained them over years and other times most were mapped into his skin after one swift moment.

Here, in this life, he had but a few. There was one on his thigh where he’d been kicked by his first pony, a few across his arms, faint marks on his knees, and across his knuckles from training. The one that stood out the most was a mark across his left shoulder blade where Robb and he had knocked over a pile of shields hiding from Theon in the armory when they were eight.

Most scars he was glad to be missing, but there were a few scars he missed.

His fingers traced over where there used to be a scar across his left forearm in several lives. He’d cut himself multiple times, saving Ygritte from a fall. Another that came to him in multiple lives was a slash across his cheek from a training duel with Ser Barristan when he’d gone to serve either Daenerys or Aegon. The scars across his brow and cheek from a warg’s eagle were also very memorable.
Of all the scars his mind searched for with an odd sense of fondness, there were dozens more he tried to forget. Some he even still experienced the rare nightmare over.

Jon spluttered, coughing as his head was pulled from the bucket. He was thankful for the air he now gulped into his lungs, relieved to be free of the rancid liquid. His lungs burned painfully from how long he’d been underwater. He dared not open his eyes as his head was pulled back sharply, sharp nails digging into his scalp. His hair was plastered to his skin, what was left of it. Large sections had been hacked away without care and his scalp was covered in itching, burning cuts.

A hand grasped his jaw, forcing his head to the side. Jon stilled at the movement, trying not to gasp as he breathed quickly.

“Open your eyes.”

It was difficult to say what had led him to this place, this situation, in this life. Jon was one of two remaining Starks. There was no doubt only a surety in this knowledge. He’d seen the rest, except for the death of Lord Stark, first hand. If not their actual death, then the body. Both of them, he and Sansa, were caged and broken.

Even throughout the constant mind games and torture, Jon’s mind still whirled over each choice, every move he, his family, and a dozen other people had made, trying to figure out where things had gone wrong.

“Perhaps I should remove your eyelids then?” Ramsay cooed at him, bringing one long, finger to press Jon’s right eyelid up. His fingernail scratched the thin skin, a momentary sting that didn’t even cause him to flinch. “Then you wouldn’t be able to hide those lovely lilac orbs from the world.” He paused drawing back, letting Jon slide to the floor as his muscles refused to keep him upright. “I bet all those servant girls who used to twitter on about the dashing Stark bastard and his lovely Dayne eyes would thank me for it!”
The sun rose too soon the next morning, color burning across the sky as their ship made port with high tide. Jon watched from the upper deck as the ship drew into the dock, his hand on the rail and Ghost at his side as they drifted closer. He was wearing one of his nicest set of clothing, a newly tailored set that proudly displayed the Stark colors and was beautifully embroidered with his House’s sigil.

He traced the direwolf broach that secured his cloak—a much thinner version than his usual furs—idly as the final rope was tied off, securing the ship. They weren’t the only ship at the dock, he could see a large ship just down the dock flying House Redwyne’s colors. In the distance, he thought he saw the sigil of House Martell along with several small houses from the Westerlands and Crownlands. Not all ships flew House colors among their masts, others flew that of different trade organizations or personal flags. Perhaps only a tenth of the ships seemed to hail from Westerosi ports.

Ghost brushed against his side as he settled his paws on the rail to look over. Jon smiled and settled a hand on the back of Ghost’s neck, fingers tangling in the thick white fur. A call from down below hailed the arrival of the dockmaster to speak with Ser Gerik, the captain of the Golden Trident.

Jon glanced over his shoulder at Luca. “Are Gomer and Kyne ready?” he asked, taking in the full Stark guard uniform Luca had donned for the first time during the voyage. It was a dress uniform, reserved for special meetings and other events, though fully functional as armor. They were rarely worn, Luca had last worn his when swearing his oath to Jon.

“They are, my lord.” Luca nodded to the main deck of the ship and Jon glanced down to see them. A smile tugged at his lips at the sight of his guards wearing the Stark guard regalia.

Jon squinted up at the sky, gaging the time of day. It was early yet, but the streets of Braavos would already be bustling in the market district. The bank may not be open yet, but that would give him some time to peruse the local wares. He’d promised his siblings gifts, after all.

“Will Ghost be joining us?” Luca asked as they climbed down to the main deck.

The direwolf waited until they had cleared the bottom of the steps and then jumped down, landing with a thump at the bottom. He chuffed at them as he loped to Jon’s side.

“Aye,” Jon nodded, “I think he’d prefer to.” He rolled his eyes as Ghost trotted to the gangplank and down towards the pier. A startled scream pierced the air, followed by Ser Gerik’s voice attempting to calm the dockmaster. Quickly, he strode forward, following his companion; his guards trailing at his heels.

The dockmaster was quite pale for how dark his skin was. He was clutching a leather-bound ledger as he stared, wide-eyed, at Ghost. The wolf stared back, unblinking, until Jon stepped to his side and ran a hand over the top of his head.

He glanced at the middle-aged dock master. “Don’t worry,” Jon caught the man’s eye. “Ghost won’t hurt anyone so long as no one attempts to harm me . . . or my companions.”

“What—What is that beast?!” the man exclaimed, eyes darting between Ghost, Jon, and Ser Gerik. The guards at his side were tense, weapons at the ready. They were sellswords, Jon could tell, but not ones that wore the symbol of any company he recognized.
Ser Gerik raised an eyebrow at Jon and then turned a placating look to the dockmaster. “He’s a direwolf. A young one at that. He’s the young lord’s pet,” he said smiling. “Still got a bit of growing to do, as well. He is quite the beast but also gentle enough, with those he likes.”

“I have never heard of a direwolf,” the dockmaster stuttered out.

“They are rather rare,” Ser Gerik admitted. “From the far North of Westeros, beyond the Wall. Very rare and only the Starks of Winterfell have ever been able to tame them.”

“A Stark?” The man’s eyes darted back to Jon. The Stark name was well known, if shrouded in mystery, and steeped with tales of savage Northmen with low wit and brawn with little cunning.

“Aye,” Jon spoke up as he strode down the gangplank. He held his chin high as he surveyed the Braavosi dock master. “Jon Stark, second son of Lord Eddard Stark the Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North.”

The man stared at Jon, taking in the carefully crafted finery he wore, and then at Ghost for a long moment before straightening. He still clutched his book to his chest, attempting to hide the shaking of his fingers. “My lord,” he cleared his throat, “welcome to the free city of Braavos.”

The streets of Braavos were busy, just as Jon had thought they would be. The markets bustled with people selling their wares, especially fisherman having returned with early morning catches. They stopped to purchase some fresh oysters from one, Ghost scenting each and chuffing his approval before they slurped them down. Kyne abstained, eyeing the shelled creature with something akin to disgust. Jon bought Ghost a silver, molted red-scaled fish as large as his head which they watched him tear to pieces and scarf down in a less traveled alley.

The city was relatively clean, compared to other large cities Jon had visited. The canals and close ocean access allowed for the citizen’s waste to be disposed of easier and instead of the usual scents he associated with large, crowded cities—like King’s Landing—the ocean and fresh fish were the most overpowering scents.

They made a few more stops on their way through the streets, stopping to peruse various wares. They passed by a blacksmith’s shop Jon made a mental note to return to on the way back. It was closed now, but he recognized it and knew the work of the owner was superb.

Ghost wisely stayed close by Jon’s side, or a pace back if he was speaking with a vendor. His presence brought a variety of reactions from the locals and other visitors to the city. Gomer was unable to stifle his laughter when ghost had startled a young woman carrying a bushel of oranges, which Jon ended up purchasing with an extra coin promised if she delivered the fruit to the ship that evening.

At one corner Ghost froze, sidestepping in front of Jon, hackles up. He brushed against Jon’s mind and the overpowering scent of smoke, incense, and burnt flesh seeped into his nostrils, causing him to nearly choke with it.

“My lord,” Luca asked, hand touching Jon’s bicep lightly.

Jerking away from the connection, he blinked up at his guard. “Sorry, Luca,” he said, voice rough, “perhaps the other street would be best.”
Not long after and less than an hour into their perusal of market wares a haughty, well-spoken man approached them about purchasing Ghost. His companion’s answering growl and Jon’s off-handed comment, “He doesn’t seem to like that idea”, had been answer enough for the well-dressed man who scurried off with his own guard at his side.

They reached the bank not long after it opened for the day’s business, entering the main entrance. The Iron bank was opulent, a grand display of not only wealth but the power the organization held—had managed to keep a hold of for centuries—not only in design but also in the guards it employed. The men at entrance eyed Jon and his companions before waving them through to the lobby.

“Jon Stark, I presume,” a young man, perhaps in his early twenties, approached them, hands folded in front of him. Two guards stood at his shoulders.

“Aye,” Jon nodded, stepping forward with Ghost at his side, “I’m Jon Stark, son of Lord Eddard Stark—”

“Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North, yes, yes, we know,” he smiled politely. “My name is Iziah Hiraal.” The man glanced between Jon and his guards. “Lord Jon, I must ask that you, and any companions that are to join you, relinquish your weapons. They will be returned to you after the meeting, of course.”

“Of course,” Jon nodded and reached to unbuckle his weapon belt. “My swornsword, Luca, and I will be happy to leave our arms with my other guards for the duration.”

Kyne stepped forward to take his belt and the other knives Jon removed from his person, along with a loop of tight, linked chain. Next to them, Luca handed over his weapons to Gomer.

The man smiled, but after a moment his eyes drifted down to where Ghost was staring at him. “Your . . . direwolf must stay with your men,” he said, returning the wolves red-eyed stare for a moment before shifting his shoulders and looking up at Jon. “I am sure you understand.”

“I do.” Jon nodded, straightened his tunic and jerkin, and stepped forward with Luca at his shoulder.

“Right this way, my lord.” Hiraal motioned him towards the other side of the main lobby with a sweeping motion of his arm.

They were led to a meeting room, a long room with high ceilings, marble floors, and tall windows. Jon thanked him and said nothing when he left the way they came. Unlike many lords, Jon wasn’t surprised that he was left to await the true representatives.

There was a table at the far side of the room and before it three beautifully carved chairs with their backs to the other entrance. A plain, simply made, low rock bench sat on their side of the table. The bankers quite clearly wanted to put on a show—especially for those with titles.

“How long will we have to wait, do you think, my lord?” Luca asked softly, raising an eyebrow as he observed the room.

Jon glanced at him and smiled slightly. “A while,” he replied.

“Do you think they watch their patrons as they wait?”

“Most likely,” he said, letting out a breathy laugh.
Motioning for Luca to stay near the door he strode forward, making his way to the table. His boots made more noise on the floor than he was used to and he adjusted his steps to quiet them as best he could. Jon stopped before the bench, resting a hand gently on the polished wood of the table for a moment, a smile quirking his lips as he remembered moments in previous lives where he stood, or sat, before this very spot.

He slipped his satchel from his shoulder and set it down on the bench, carefully removing the documents he’d been keeping safe during the journey. After arranging them Jon settled in to wait, seated on the hard, stone bench. It wasn’t comfortable, but he’d experience staying still in much worse places.

He squared his shoulders and adjusted his position on occasion, hoping to keep his limbs from falling asleep. The Iron Bank was never consistent on how long it made its patrons wait, but in his experience, those who claimed royal titles tended to spend the most time tapping their foot and pacing circles. It was doubtful they’d have to wait as long as Daenerys had the last time he’d been here. Jon still couldn’t say whether the bankers had relented and come in early or if their arrival was the originally planned time. It was probably the former. Drogon’s appearance breathing fire atop the roof into the open sky probably caused them more worry than they let appear in their countenance.

 Luck was on his side, Jon thought, when, much sooner than he’d expected, the entry behind the three chairs opened and two men stepped in not even half an hour later. Two men entered, standing tall and well dressed in similar outfits. The first through the door was young with a dark complexion that reminded him of many of the Dornishmen Jon had met; his eyes were dark but looked green and he had mud-brown hair that was so dark it shone black in the right light. The other man was older, nearly bald, with brown eyes and a thick, mostly grey beard. The elder sat himself upon the middle chair, the younger to his right.

“*I am Maiko Hanir and this is my colleague,*” the elder of the two motioned to the younger, “*Torren Faorem. I apologize for the wait, Lord Jon, there was some slight confusion regarding who would be meeting with you today.*”

“The wait was no trouble at all,” Jon said, trying not to let his surprise show on his face. “*I am sorry for any confusion that may have arisen with my arrival. As my father stated in the letter he sent, I am here to negotiate a loan on behalf of House Stark as well as review the Stark accounts held here.*”

“We are aware of why you are,” Hanir said, his face a stoic mask. “*The Iron Bank keeps itself abreast of its clients, their holdings, dealings, and family trees. Some might say our hall of records holds more detailed information than that of the Citadel. When it comes to our clients at any rate. In the past, we have acted as unbiased sources for inheritance squabbles in Westeros and Essos. At least when men are more interested in the truth than personal preferences.*” He eyed Jon for a long moment, hand’s resting on the arms of his chair. “*It also helps us keep our client’s wealth secure.*”

Something twisted in his gut and Jon wondered what the man was leading the conversation towards; obviously, he had something on the agenda than the original purpose of this meeting. Straightening his shoulders, Jon pressed his fingers over the parchment that listed the bride price Rhaegar claimed to have set aside for House Stark upon his wedding to Lyanna.

“I am sure that you have heard,” Hanir continued, “that, while the Iron Bank may have some competition, we overwhelmingly hold the highest percentage of clientele on both Essos and Westeros. As well as other parts of the known world. We hold ourselves accountable for any and all mistakes our agents make, as well as act as enforcement to ensure that all debts are paid.”
Jon was acutely aware of that. He’d lost his own life at the hands of the Iron Bank’s agents before, collateral damage when they came to take their due.

“House Stark has had a good reputation with the Iron Bank,” Jon ventured as ice threaded its way down his spine. He managed to keep his voice sure and solid. “The few debts we currently have are small and paid timely. The largest debts incurred by our House were paid off before I was born.”

“That they were,” Faoren acknowledged as he placed the leather-bound sheaf of papers on the table he’d been keeping on his lap, “but we’re not just talking about House Stark. It did take a bit of time to verify your identity, but we were aware of the possibility of your existence before you were born.”

The thin threads of ice sank like a stone into his gut, the air in his lungs slowly exhaling in a long, controlled stream through his nose. It would do him no good to lose face.

“As I said before, the Iron Bank prides itself in preventing incidents when it comes to the estates of our clients,” Hanir said as he waited for Torren to sort through the papers in front of him.

“You seem to have me at a disadvantage,” Jon said after a long moment, gaze shifting between the two men. “I was sent here by Lord Eddard Stark to discuss the possibility of a loan for the coming winter,” he paused for a moment, “as well as to go over the veracity of the bride price that was once promised by Prince Rhaegar of House Targaryen when he wed Lady Lyanna of House Stark.”

Hanir smiled, amusement playing on his features. “We can certainly discuss your uncle receiving a loan and, yes, there is an account holding a bride price for House Stark that you may claim for Lord Eddard.” His companion set out an inkwell and quill in front of him. “There are other matters to discuss, however, ones the Iron Bank finds much more important.”

“Is Jon your birth name? In the records Prince Rhaegar sent he only included his preference should Lady Lyanna birth him a girl. Visenya,” Faoren glanced up at him as he handed Hanir the quill, “doesn’t quite work for a boy, does it?”

Clenching his jaw, Jon froze. Gods, had he made a mistake? Perhaps it should have been Robb that came here. If his presence caused added debt to his family . . . he breathed in deep through his nose the warm air filling his lungs felt like lead.

“Jaehaerys,” he said firmly, “I was named Jaehaerys Targaryen upon my birth.”

“But you prefer Jon?”

“Aye,” Jon nodded shortly, “it’s my name. The one I grew up knowing.”

“Of course,” Hanir said, inclining his head and letting his lips quirk into a small smile as he wet the quill and jotted down Jaehaerys on the parchment. “I believe it would benefit both the Iron Bank and yourself if we put aside talks of House Stark for the moment and focused on House Targaryen’s accounts. Especially that which Prince Rhaegar left to you.”

“I was unaware that House Targaryen had accounts with the Iron Bank outside of those of such purpose as the bride price or that which had belonged to the Iron Throne,” Jon said, mouth dry. After a long moment, he swallowed, attempting to wet his vocal cords. “If the Iron Bank feels it important, I would hear it.”

“While House Targaryen did keep much of their wealth in the crown’s name,” Faoren said as he pulled a few more pieces of parchment for Hanir to notate out of the sheaf, “which was claimed
by King Robert Baratheon when he took the throne, your paternal grandfather, King Aerys, did not keep all his wealth under the crown's name like some of his ancestors did. In the latter days of his reign, Aerys Targaryen grew quite paranoid and he set up several accounts with us . . . as did your father.”

“Prince Rhaegar left accounts for each of his family members,” Hanir said and then clarified, “his wives and children. The account for a third child, by his wife Princess Lyanna, was the hardest to verify ownership of, but the Iron Bank is confident in both your identity and claim over it.”

He eyed the slip of paper Faoren slid across the table to him. The numbers listed would be more than enough to afford him a good start near anywhere he wished to go—even to start a hold of his own in Westeros. This wasn’t something Jon had expected; he’d never had an inkling that Rhaegar had left funds for his children. There hadn’t been a single life where the bank had ever approached him like this.

But then in every other life, Jon had arrived with Daenerys and her three dragons at his side, threats burning in his aunt’s eyes. He had never come with just Aegon either. It had always been the three of them when his brother had come. Daenerys had always been more apt to burn bridges with the bank, never wishing to claim the crown’s debt when she claimed the crown itself.

The Iron Bank could hold a grudge when threatened, after all.

“Will all of these documents list my name?” he asked, fingers running over the corrected section after making sure it was dry. Previously it had simply read child of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Targaryen nee Stark.

“No,” Faoren said as he set aside the papers Hanir corrected to dry. “Only those that reside in our most secure records vault. The Iron Bank prides itself on its discretion and the confidentiality of its patron’s personal information.”

Relief cascaded through muscles that Jon hadn’t realized had tensed. “On behalf of House Stark, and House Targaryen, I wish to thank the Iron Bank for their discretion.”

“And the other accounts?” Jon asked after a few long moments.

“Consolidated,” Hanir said offhandedly, “they, of course, will follow the line of inheritance. As do those that King Aerys created.”

“What?” Jon’s head snapped up, mask broken. He stared, wide-eyed at the men in front of him, eyes darting between them. He was breathing faster, startled puffs that he had to force into submission.

“Only the head of House Targaryen is to have access to them,” the elder man said as he sorted out the paperwork, there was an edge of annoyance in his tone, “as much as it pains the Iron Bank. King Aerys insisted on very strict stipulations in regards to what investments could be done without direct approval.” There was a pinched look to his face that spoke far clearer than any of the words he had said.

Something in the contract was preventing them from using the accounts to further the bank’s wealth. They had been quite clear in how important lineages were to inheritances and the security of the bank. It protected them from providing access to the wrong individuals. To tell him that he wasn’t head of House Targaryen as a Trueborn son of Prince Rhaegar . . .

“What is my status in regards to the other accounts?” he asked, attempting to school his features
back into the mask he’d practiced over so many lives. “If you’re permitted to tell me.”

“Heir,” Faoren advised him before slipping out another record. “At the moment, you are currently listed as heir to the family should the head die without issue.”

Jon glanced between them, swallowing thickly. “Viserys is not the head of House Targaryen as Rhaegar had trueborn children.” *I’m one of them.*

“That is correct,” Hanir confirmed, nodding. “Your uncle was most upset when he was advised that the Iron Bank held no accounts for him to draw from.”

The hope that had been winding its way inside his gut blossomed, breaking free of the rock settled there, and his lips twitched ever so slightly. His heart pounded in his chest and suddenly he wanted nothing more than to run outside and board the nearest ship. It didn’t matter to him that the Iron Bank likely wanted to cause a conflict with their words—to have the accounts be known so *someone* could take control and allow them to invest what was not withdrawn.

Aegon was alive.
Dragonstone was truly breathtaking, rising from the sea, with statues and towers in the likeness of
dragons adorning the cliffs and castle walls. He felt drawn to it, a niggling in the pit of his stomach
that reminded him of the feelings he had towards Winterfell.

Ghost bumped his cold nose against Jon’s hand, stepping forward to force his head beneath Jon’s
fingers. He glanced down at the direwolf, a smile quirking his lips as he met Ghost’s red-eyed
gaze.

“Your grace,” one of his men spoke behind him, a step behind his left shoulder. He turned away
from the view to face him. “Ser Davos wishes you to know we will be docking at the harbor within
the hour.”

“Thank you, Jaren,” Jon said, watching as the man, clothed in the fanciest version of the Stark
uniform Sansa and her handmaidens could arrange in the limited time they’d had, bowed and
moved off.

He sighed, glanced at Ghost and then turned back towards Dragonstone. This was not the first life
Jon had gone to treat with a Targaryen at their ancestral seat, but before it had always been
Daenerys alone. This time something had changed. The letter that had been sent to Winterfell—
summons for House Bolton to present themselves and swear fealty—had been signed by both
Queen Daenerys Targaryen and King Aegon Targaryen.

The name had confused Jon and stumped his advisors. By all accounts, Aegon Targaryen, the sixth
of his name and Jon’s elder half-brother, had been slain as an infant during the sacking of Kings
Landing. None had heard any rumors and the few spy’s the North retained never brought whispers
of the young man’s existence.

They passed a dozen or so ships as they headed into port, most flying the Targaryen crest. There
were, however, a few other Houses, large and small, represented, but most were already known to
have allied themselves with House Targaryen—such as Houses Tyrell and Martell.

Jon, upon stepping onto the dock, was met by a mixed guard of Dothraki and a sellsword company
he was surprised to recognize as the Golden Company.

“Well, if it isn’t Lord Eddard Stark’s bastard, Jon Snow!” a familiar voice exclaimed and it took
him a moment to find Tyrion Lannister’s short-form making his way toward him through the
soldiers. The man stopped a few paces away and eyed him speculatively. “Last I heard you had
risen to Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch and yet here you are. I’d say you grew tired of
wearing all black but it appears you just switched it out for nearly black and a few splashes of
white.”

It was true, Jon wore the reversed colors of House Stark—even though Sansa had tried to argue
against it to his surprise—per custom. The rest of his guard and retinue retained the official colors
and both versions of the sigil flew side by side on the ship at Sansa’s insistence. They were the last
two Stark’s in her mind, though they knew Bran still lived beyond the wall traveling with Meera
Reed. They’d received a letter from them not a fortnight after retaking Winterfell, passed on from
Castle black. Sansa had insisted that he bear her sigil beside that of bastards in representing the
North as its King. Arya’s continued existence was always a toss-up. Often, she’d show up in
Winterfell out of the blue, but in some lives, they never saw her again. Little Rickon was missing
still as well. A large storm and the increasing cold had devastated Skagos where rumor had it the
wildling Osha had taken him. Der Davos had arranged, along with Lord Manderly, for a crew of trusted men to search for him.

Jon couldn’t help but smile a little as Tyrion continued speaking.

“Yet here you are representing your House and flying Stark colors. Did you come to your senses and get tired of a wall full of dicks?”

“You are speaking with King Jon Snow, first of his name, King of the North, Commander of the Free Folk—” Jon winced inwardly at that bit, the Free Folk hated titles and refused to call him King outside of the occasional mocking ‘King Crow’, but they did agree to follow his command in battle and somehow that title had been gifted to him. Perhaps his men thought he needed a longer list of titles to contend with the Mother of Dragons. “—the White Wolf—”

He held up a hand to silence the young, outspoken guard. While not one of his first choices, he was a cousin of Lord Glover’s, intensely loyal, and it would have been disrespectful to turn him away as most other Northern Houses also had loyal men within their retinue.

“Lord Tyrion,” Jon smiled, lips remaining closed except when he spoke, “It is good to see you again. As you may be able to discern, circumstances have changed.” He glanced at the guards who stood at the lord’s back. “I have been relieved of my oaths to the Nights Watch legally and can provide proof of such. I am unsure of what you have heard but . . . Lady Sansa Stark and I have reclaimed Winterfell and the North for House Stark from the Boltons, and the Lannisters. The Houses of the North rallied behind us and have proclaimed me King of the North.” He paused, meeting Tyrion’s mismatched eyes. “As King in the North, I have come to treat with King Aegon and Queen Daenerys.” He let his smile widen as Ghost slipped down the gangplank to his side, his head brushing Jon’s elbow. “I believe we have an enemy in common.”

After reviewing the information on both his own and the bride price account, Jon requested a decent-sized withdrawal from both accounts. Neither had been touched since the beginning of Robert’s rebellion and had accrued a decent amount of interest. They had also negotiated a small loan for House Stark, nothing large but enough to fund several shipments of glass and other supplies to White Harbor and then across the North to various smaller Houses in need of support. It was better to have a small loan that could be confirmed—the bank would never reveal the amount without permission unless payment was refused—should anyone inquire. It would provide a guise for where the funds they removed from the crypts vault originated. He’d returned to the ship after the meeting at the bank, his mind awhirl with thoughts and emotions.

Aegon was alive and now . . . now his heart and mind were torn. Sitting upon the bed in his cabin, Jon held his head in his hand, fingers gripping his curls tightly. He had a duty to his family in this world . . . his father, Robb, Arya . . . Sansa, Bran, Rickon . . . but Aegon was his family too. In every life Jon had found him in, if they both—if Jon—survived the initial meeting, they were family.

Ghost shoved his head between Jon’s elbows, forcing him to sit up so his muzzle could press against Jon’s sternum. Dropping his hands from his head, he tangled them into the fur of his direwolf’s neck. Ghost backed up a step and stared up at him, red eyes meeting grey.

“What should I do, boy?” Jon asked, voice a harsh whisper.
The direwolf whined at the back of his throat and sat, still staring at him. Jon dropped his head forward and pressed their foreheads together. “So much is different here. It isn’t like the other lives we found him . . . King Robert is still alive and we have no way of knowing if he’ll die by boar or drink . . . or if Jon Arryn will.” Until Joffrey was on the throne, Jon didn’t think his father would support any insurrection. No. He knew his father wouldn’t, not without good cause.

“I have to choose . . . don’t I?” he whispered, brow drawing together. In every other life, he’d had to choose.

Ghost drew back and licked him, gently but quickly over his cheeks. Laughing, Jon leaned back and turned his head away. After a few moments, he opened his eyes and looked back at his companion.

The direwolf was staring at him, head tilted slightly to the side. After a moment, he stood and backed up a few steps, moving towards the door before looking over his shoulder.

“You’re right,” Jon said, settling his hands on his knees. “Doesn’t matter. Not yet, anyway. We still have business to attend to here.”

He’d arranged to return to the Iron Bank in a sennight to pick up the majority of the funds, not wanting to have it on hand at port for longer than necessary. He found himself quite glad for the guard and strength of the vessel he’d been afforded for the trip; it provided a security he’d not thought they’d need. Now he had seven days to negotiate dozens of trades on behalf of the North.

Trade deals weren’t Jon’s forte, but he had arranged them in the past often with assistance from Ser Davos or one of Lord Manderly’s men. Even in this life, he had the assistance he desperately needed. The captain of the ship, Ser Gerik, had been serving House Manderly since he was a boy on their merchant ships—and during wars on the few battle-ready vessels they had—traveling all over the known world, trading for things the North needed. He’d been knighted around the time of the Greyjoy rebellion after saving the life of one of Lord Manderly’s cousins.

There were few that could claim better knowledge or skills in negotiating trade deals than he could. He also had extensive contacts across Westeros and Essos and reported often to Lord Manderly who relayed important information to Lord Stark from him.

His experience and the level of trust invested in him was why Ser Gerik accompanied Jon during most of the trade deals he was organizing. The knight was known for his silver tongue and his tendency to be a thorn in the side of any who double-crossed him and the family he served. Jon was more than happy to let the man take the lead in most of the arrangements they made. If nothing else than for the fact that many of those they were negotiating with saw his youth and tried to take advantage.

“I envy your way with words,” Jon said one evening as they watched a merchant move away from their table after negotiating a deal for a shipload of glass panes.

“It takes a great deal of practice, my lord,” Ser Gerik said, smiling around his ale glass, “but one can learn.”

“I suppose . . .” Jon quirked a self-deprecating grin. “Though I doubt I will ever have your way with words, even if I live to see a hundred name days.”

“If you live to see a hundred name days your way with words clearly will have been apt enough!” Gerik laughed.
“So you say,” he said, smiling fully as he glanced down at his drink, “but perhaps I might just surround myself with those who speak well in my stead.”

“Wise choice,” Ser Gerik nodded, “for a lord to make.”

As he sought words to respond with something caught his eye. Behind him, Luca shifted, standing straighter from where he had his back against the thick stone wall of the tavern. Jon blinked, surprised at the sight of the men approaching, especially the man at the head of the group. He was barely feeling the effects of his drink, so this was certainly not a hallucination. Jon couldn’t help but wish it was. At least a little.

The man striding towards him disregarded all sense of propriety as he sauntered to a stop at their table. He called an order to one of the barmaids and then turned towards Jon, eyeing him. “I heard the most interesting of rumors just yesterday,” he said, hand resting on the back of one of the empty chairs across the table, “of a Stark far from home, traveling with a giant white wolf. A direwolf, they say, though I could scarce believe it. So, this, I thought, I must see for myself. A young man,” a look that told of a pleasant memory of said man stole over his face for a brief moment, “directed me here and when I entered I saw you.” He eyed Jon again. “You certainly have the Stark look, if my memory serves.”

“I do and I am.” Jon nodded. “I am Jon Stark, son of Lord Eddard Stark,” he lifted his chin to meet the man’s black eyes, “and you have heard correctly. My white direwolf, Ghost, travels with me, though he remained on the ship tonight,” he said, glancing over to the man’s Dornish guard. “Please excuse me if I am wrong, but would you be Prince Oberyn Martell?”

“Ah!” Prince Oberyn smiled widely and glanced at his closest guard, “I see my reputation proceeds me!” He pulled the chair away from the table, it’s feet scraping against the rock floor. “May I sit?”

Jon nodded and motioned for him to do so. “Of course, my prince.” He watched as the man took the seat, settling in and glancing at the half-empty platter of bread, meat, and cheese.

“Excuse me, my lord, my prince,” Ser Gerik nodded to both as he stood, “I must return to my ship to ensure the day’s cargo and trades have been properly settled.” He bowed slightly and then left, one of his men seated nearby following.

“I was surprised to hear of a Stark in Essos,” Oberyn said after his men had sorted themselves nearby. Luca and the two other guards, Kyne and a young man named Derwood, had rearranged themselves at Jon’s back and to his side, a mirror to the prince’s men. “It is not often that members of your House travel south of the Neck, let alone to the free cities,” he continued, smiling flirtatiously at the young server who dropped off his drinks. Nodding to the platter he asked, “Do you mind?”

“Not at all, my prince,” Jon said and took a chunk of soft, white cheese as Oberyn chose a roll of cracked bread. “Going south has not ended well for Starks in recent times.” He hadn’t much cause to interact with the prince in recent lives, but he knew the man’s basic history and the usual timeline of his life through the War of the Five Kings. Oberyn often met his death at the hands of the Mountain in his quest to avenge his sister and her children. And when he didn’t he was a formidable adversary to any who dared cross him. “What brings you to Braavos?” he asked after a moment.

“My reasons are much the same as yourself, I would wager,” Oberyn responded before taking a long sip of wine. He paused after, the rim held near his lips. “Although perhaps my reasons involve a few more naked people than yours. You are what, three and ten?”
“Five and ten, actually,” Jon said softly, attempting to keep emotion from his words.

“Not too young, then,” Oberyn smiled wider and then shrugged, “well for me you are. My tastes run at least a couple years older.” He didn’t even bother to disguise the way he looked Jon over as he spoke.

Jon heard the shift of his guards and leaned forward a little, taking up his own glass and running his finger over the rim. “You are correct in your initial assumption, my prince. I doubt I will have time nor inclination to lose myself in pleasures of the flesh on this journey.”

Oberyn took another drink of wine and chewed a bite of still-warm bread. “My apologies, but I am not as knowledgeable in the children of the Houses outside of Dorne as he should be.” He leaned back in his chair. “You said you are five and ten?”

“Aye,” Jon nodded, “I am.”

“Five and ten would place your birth at the end of the war,” Oberyn eyed him thoughtfully, “I had heard Lord Stark named his firstborn after his good friend the King.”

“He did,” Jon said, wrapping his fingers around the neck of the glass, “I am Lord Stark’s second son, his bastard, recently legitimized.”

“Ah! Yes,” Oberyn exclaimed, slouching back in his chair, “I had forgotten the honorable Lord Stark had a bastard.” He raised an eyebrow before taking another pull of his wine. “Quite unusual for a Northern bastard to be legitimized. Especially one with . . . how many trueborn children does Lord Stark have now?”

“I have three brothers and two sisters,” Jon said after a moment hesitation. He waited for the prince to say something, but the man seemed content to drink and watch him. “I cannot say why my lord father requested my legitimization,” he said after unclenching his jaw, “only that he did.”

“Do you find it offensive to discuss your birth status now that you bear your Houses name?” Oberyn asked, black eyes staring at him intently. He rolled his eyes and then waved a hand. “I do not mean to offend, I am just curious.”

“It doesn’t offend me,” Jon answered honestly, he dropped the remainder of the cheese to the table. “I am only recently legitimized. Lord Stark announced it on my last name day. It is just a topic that many seem to wish to discuss with me.”

“Then perhaps we should change topics for the time being.” Oberyn said, twisting to lean forward, elbow on the table. “I have never seen a direwolf before.” He grinned around his cup. “Would you show me yours?”
Late Summer Part V

The sunlight bouncing off the sand and ocean waves nearly blinded him. It was warm here, for all that autumn was near an end, and the layers he wore were much too thick. Jon leaned forward in his saddle, hands gripping the spikes on Rhaegal’s neck in front of him. The dragon shifted beneath him, body and wings angling until they were headed to the ground where his aunt’s men were waiting along with a group of Dornish riders.

He looked to his right and saw Drogon, Daenerys on his back, swooping down to land after breathing a line of fire across a dune. Once the smoke cleared, he saw a long patch of glass glinting in the sunlight. After Drogon had landed and Daenerys dismounted, Jon allowed Rhaegal to land to the left of his larger brother; Viserion swooped down moments later to land to Drogon’s right.

Daenerys met his eyes, glancing at him over her shoulder as he unchained himself from the saddle and slid from Rhaegal’s back. She nodded slightly, purple eyes sliding from him over to where their men stood and then she turned back to the Dornish, lifting her chin.

Stepping forward, Jon spoke, casting his voice to the best of his ability, “I present to you Queen Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen first of her name, Queen of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, Protector of the Realm. The Unburnt, Breaker of Chains, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Queen of Meereen, and Mother of Dragons.”

A man stepped forward, announcing that Prince Oberyn, brother to Prince Doran, ruler of Dorne, stood before them, welcoming Queen Daenerys to their land.

“I scarcely believed the rumors could be true.” Prince Oberyn stepped forward, eyes locked on the form of Drogon standing at Daenerys’ back. “But I see that they are.” His eyes shifted to Jon’s form at her side. “I heard there was a second dragon rider, but I thought perhaps someone of Valyrian descent from Essos . . . you have the look of a Northerner.” He tilted his head, eyes narrowing. “Of a Stark.”

“This is my nephew, Jon, son of Lyanna Stark and Rhaegar Targaryen,” she said, voice collected as she watched the man. “He has sworn an oath to stand at my side.” She paused, eyes narrowing as she focused on Prince Oberyn. “If we weren’t the last of our House I may have given in to his request to join my Kingsguard.”

Jon knew what she was doing. His presence could be interpreted as an insult to Dorne. Rhaegar had left Elia Martell for Lyanna, after all.

“So, the wolf girl was pregnant,” Oberyn said, eying him. “Elia thought she might be towards the end. Stated as such in the last letter she sent me. She hoped that if Lyanna bore Rhaegar the daughter he wanted his madness might ebb. That he might come back to her.”

There was nothing Jon could say, though he wished he could have said something. His parents had made their decisions and caused a war that cost the lives of this man’s sister and her children. His brother and sister.

He stepped forward, forcing himself to meet the prince’s eyes. “I cannot apologize for the acts of my parents. But I can help you get revenge against the men who killed your sister and my siblings.” And killed my family. He glanced at his aunt, his Queen. “We both can. With Fire and Blood.”
“Well,” Oberyn started, looking between them and then to the dragons, “you certainly have the fire part down.” He clapped his hands. “I assume you have a plan for your conquest, your grace?” he asked, turning his attention to Daenerys.

She smiled tightly at him. “We do.”

Jon stood, watching as people passed on the docks, going about their business, boarding or leaving various vessels. Soon he would be meeting with Prince Oberyn at a private, and expensive, dining establishment. They had delayed the dinner a day in order to make arrangements; Ser Gerik taking point through his contacts to ensure that the cooks and staff were to be trusted. Both parties were supplying taste testers as well for the food that would also work as the servers for their private dinner.

The prince’s presence in Braavos had been surprising and him approaching Jon even more so. In his past lives, Jon did interact with the Dornishman and, more often, his daughters, but usually, it was when he—or those he worked with—sought them out. A few times he had come to treat with Daenerys or Aegon when Jon was present. Rarely, not even if Jon was King while Oberyn was still alive, did the prince ever seek Jon out preferring to leave the dealings with wolves to his niece and nephews.

Jon always felt a bit awkward when interacting with the prince, most likely due to the man’s propensity to goad and tease him once he understood how Jon’s mind worked. Much like Ygritte.

Sighing, he glanced aside to watch as a few crew members worked on loading another bunch of crates below deck. Most of the cargo they were currently carrying would be brought back to Westeros for trade, but the Captain had negotiated trades for a few other goods that could be bartered near anywhere—including at sea if the met with another vessel.

“Are you ready, my lord?” Gomer asked from his shoulder. Luca would be waiting for them, having gone to oversee the safety of the establishment.

Jon glanced down at Ghost who was lying near his feet. “Aye,” he met Jon’s eyes, “we are.”

The sun was heading towards the horizon as they passed through the cobblestone streets and alleys. Half the shops were still open, the other half recently closed for the day. Ghost chuffed next to him as they passed a tavern, a few drunks stumbling out of the entryway.

“Are you sure this is a good idea, my lord?” Kyne asked him as Ghost slunk ahead of their party by a few paces.

One of the drunks screeched, lurching into his companion who stumbled back into the doorway. Ghost’s tail swept playfully back and forth and Jon rolled his eyes.

Glancing at the guard, he said, “Dorne is a potential ally that we cannot afford to slip through our fingers. We will need their support if the coming winter will be as harsh as they say.” Jon watched as a few passersby skittered away at the sight of his companion. A city guard eyed them as well, but Jon had already spoken with them several times and word had spread quickly regarding the
direwolf’s supposed tameness. “Prince Oberyn approached me for a reason. I doubt it was just regarding Ghost. I want to know what it is, but, either way, we cannot afford to slight the Martell’s by ignoring them.”

“The rumors?” Kyne asked.

“Perhaps.” Jon nodded. “Prince Oberyn and Prince Doran are both highly intelligent men, by all accounts, and for all the rumors of a quick temper the man doesn’t act without some foresight.”

“And you think he’ll side with the North,” Kyne said as they caught sight of the dining establishment down the road. “Even if certain . . . facts come out?”

“Ghost,” Jon called and the wolf paused, looking back at him. Their eyes met, but he didn’t have to say anything for his companion to understand. Ghost dropped back as they walked, into the middle of the men behind him.

“I think his hatred of one House is greater than any other and if it becomes clear they end up an enemy of the North . . .” Jon said softly as he was finally able to distinguish Oberyn from his men. “. . . and I have access to information that may sway his mind if it comes to that.”

Kyne eyed him and then nodded and moments later they arrived at the front of the private establishment. It was an expensive place, with private dining halls and a beautiful view of the ocean. The owners and cooks were also very accommodating of their seeming paranoia thanks to their connection with Ser Gerik. Jon didn’t know the particulars, but he gathered he helped provide certain hard to get ingredients for a good price.

Two guards, a Dornishman and Luca, were standing in the entry. Luca nodded slightly at him and then glanced between the two parties. A man stood between them of average size but thicker than most men his age around the middle.

He strode forward, clapped his hands, and bowed. “Prince Oberyn,” he said, smiling, “Lord Jon, my name is Sharech Graavo, and I am the owner and head cook. May I show you to your private dining room?”

Jon nodded and was surprised when a familiar face stepped out from behind the prince, moving to take his arm. “We would be honored, Sharech,” Ellaria Sand said, voice as husky sweet as Jon remembered it being the last time he’d met her. “It has been too long, my friend.” He wondered if her tongue was still as barbed and her hands as adept with poison.

“Yet you are still as beautiful as ever!” he smiled widely at her. “Time has been quite good to you.”

“Kind words, Sharech,” she said as she and Oberyn approached the man. “You flatter me.”

“I only speak honestly,” Sharech said as he led them through the main room towards a short staircase. “You are more beautiful than all the women in Braavos, even my wife.” The comment was received with a good-natured roll of the eyes and smile.

“I have met your wife,” the prince put in, “and she is certainly a rose in the desert.”

Sharech laughed as he entered the room they’d be dining in, a balcony dominated most of the far wall with tall, open shutters and thin curtains blowing in a light sea breeze. “That was before five children and the new pastry recipes she has come up with,” he grinned as he waved them towards the table. There were four guards in the room, including Luca and the Dornish guard who met them at the door, two Stark and two Martell, “which, of course, you must try tonight!”
“We will.” Ellaria smiled as they stood before the table.

As Sharech left the room the prince turned his attention to Jon with a smile.

“This is my paramour, Ellaria Sand,” Oberyn said.

Smiling, Jon stepped forward and took her hand gently. He raised her hand and leant in to kiss her knuckles gently. “Lovely to meet you, my lady,” he said quietly.

She smiled at him. “It is always good to meet another of my brothers.”

Blinking, he raised an eyebrow, but his grin did not falter. In every life, she referred to him as such when they met. All bastards were family in her eyes. It was a fact that led her to treat him kindly in most lives, even at times when many among her land frowned or cursed at him for his parentage. He’d long ago found that, for the most part, it was only other bastards that understood that it was not the child’s fault whom their parents were.

“I find I must apologize ahead of time as I am not well versed in Dornish culture,” Jon said as they took their seats. It was then that Ghost slipped in through the doorway, Jon saw Gomer standing behind the direwolf for a moment and nodded at him.

Ellaria gasped.

“There’s no cause for alarm,” Jon said, eyeing the Dornish guard closest to the door. The man had tensed, arm dropping to his sword.

Prince Oberyn had yet to sit and moved around the table to get a better view. His eyes widened as he took in the sight of the direwolf. Ghost’s red eyes glinted in the lantern light and view of the setting sun from the balcony. “By the Gods . . . he’s magnificent,” Oberyn breathed. He was sensible enough not to move closer to Ghost. “He is beautiful,” the prince turned his gaze to Jon for a brief moment, “and he is not yet full-grown?”

“His mother is large enough my lord father could ride her if pressed.” Jon smiled at Ghost who sauntered toward the balcony, practically preening under their gaze.

“You have tamed him?” Ellaria asked, eyes following the wolf as he moved.

“No,” Jon said, chuckling slightly. He shifted in his seat, turning to hold a hand out to Ghost. The direwolf flicked an ear and turned to look at him for a moment. “He and his siblings are in no way truly tame,” he met the red-eyed gaze and smiled, “but Ghost listens to me.” He turned to look at Ellaria. “No harm will come to any of you from him while I am here.” Not unless harm comes to me.

“Red eyes as well,” Oberyn observed as he moved to sit down. “Beautiful.”

Ghost flicked his tail, shifted, and then sat in front of the window, turning to look back outside.

Dropping his hand Jon nodded his agreement. “Aye, that he is.”
“What a beautiful creature,” Ellaria said softly as she watched them from dock. She lifted her eyes to meet Jon’s. “Welcome to Dorne, Jon Snow, your brother sent word of your impending arrival.”

Jon raised an eyebrow as he and Ghost stopped before her. “You have me at a disadvantage.”

“My name is Ellaria Sand,” she said, smiling in response as she took his hands and pressed a kiss to each of his cheeks. “Prince Doran thought it best if your arrival was handled with discretion.”

He had frozen at the greeting for a brief moment before softly clearing his throat. “Understandable.” Jon nodded his agreement, blushing as she eyed him for a long moment.

She laughed and slotted her arm through his elbow, pulling him into step beside her. “So, perhaps we should come up with an alternative excuse for your arrival here in Dorne, no?” Ellaria asked as they began to walk up the dock, Ghost on Jon’s other side. “I do not suppose you have any ideas?”

“My mother,” Jon said, glancing at her. “I was told I was born in Dorne, but my father refused to tell me who she is.”

Ellaria arched a long, dark eyebrow as he spoke, pressing her lips together and nodding in thought. “And now he is in the hands of the Lannisters,” she said, practically spit the name, a scowl marring her beautiful face.

“He is.” He nodded as he looked away, gaze trailing over the people they passed. Dorne was as separate culturally from the rest of the Kingdoms, more so perhaps, than the North was.

“Well,” she said softly, “perhaps we can solve your mystery as well as other things during your time here, brother.”

He glanced her way, brow furrowing, and frowned.

“All bastards are my brothers and sisters,” Ellaria pat his arm gently, smiling. “The largest, and best, family one could ever ask for. In another life, you might even have been a Sand as well.”

Jon almost couldn’t help but laugh. No, in every life he was always a Snow. “If my father hadn’t claimed me, perhaps.”

“You are lucky that he did,” Ellaria smiled sadly at him. “Most lords north of Dorne ignore their naturalborn sons and daughters. But you, you grew up in a castle with your trueborn brothers and sisters and now you are an envoy for your brother, King in the North. Even in Dorne, such a position is rare to come by for our brothers and sisters.”

As they settled into their seats, basic pleasantries being exchanged, the servers, and taste testers, arrived—a Dornishman and Haig—carrying wine and several dishes of appetizers to whet their palate. Each platter held a different type of seafood. Fresh oysters, scallops, and shrimp. Shellfish had never been Jon’s favorite, but he could appreciate it and the exotic flavors the cook designed.
“This looks wonderful,” Ellaria said as she eyed the dish of shrimp, “and smells utterly divine.”

“That it does,” Jon agreed as he served himself some of the scallops and a spoonful of the delicate, citrus smelling sauce served alongside them.

“My compliments to the cook,” Oberyn smiled as he lifted an oyster, added a bit of the vinegar-sauce in a dish next to the platter, and downed it. He expressed his appreciation vocally with an exuberance Jon had never found himself able to exert or force at a dinner table, no matter if it was expected in the culture of the people who dined with.

“We were surprised when you suggested Sherech’s,” Ellaria smiled after setting the tail of a shrimp aside, “but we are very happy that you did.”

“Ser Gerik, the captain of my ship is a friend of his,” Jon said before biting into a scallop. The flavor was strong but lovely. Had he only been accustomed to Northern fare it may have been a bit too spicy for his tastes, but after traveling Essos with Daenerys or Aegon in multiple lives he was able to control any reaction that may be taken for distaste. “He highly recommended this establishment, based both on his friendship and the word of some of Sherech’s patrons.”

They drifted into silence for a few minutes as they ate, before Ghost shifted, settling into a laying position. His fur was glowing as the sky outside was painted with pinks, purples, and gold.

“Where did you find such a marvelous creature?” Oberyn asked before lifting his wine glass to his lips to take a long sip. “Did you travel beyond the Wall for him?”

Jon shook his head, glancing at Ghost. “No. While I have traveled to and beyond the Wall,” he said as he reached for an oyster, “Ghost traveled with me.” He smiled as Ghost looked back at them over his shoulder; his red eyes flashed in the light. “My lord father was hunting in the Wolfswood along with some of his men when Ghost’s mother attacked a wild boar in front of them, saving his life. She was injured and for some reason allowed them to transport her to Winterfell. They say she ate half a deer on the way as they only had the one cart to transport her and the days catch with.”

“I am surprised a wild creature would let them get so close,” Oberyn said, brow rising. “Desert wolves would sooner attack a person than accept aid when injured or caught in a trap.”

“And if my lord father had not been there, she may have been just as apt to attack the hunters as the boar, especially once she was wounded.” Ghost stood as Jon spoke, making his way over to the table with a silent grace. Jon speared a scallop with as little sauce as possible and present it to him once he reached them. Ghost licked the sauce that clung to it away, testing the taste, before taking it carefully from the knife, white teeth baring as his lips curled back.

“She was pregnant then?” Ellaria asked having paused to watch, her hand hovering mid-air with an oyster dripping the spicy vinegar sauce.

“Aye.” Jon glanced at her. “She bore six pups. Each of Lord Stark’s children have one . . . as does my Uncle Benjen.” He set his knife aside and ran a hand over Ghost’s head as the direwolf settled down at his feet. “Ghost was the runt of the litter.”

“He is certainly not a runt now,” Ellaria said pointedly and then took a moment to down the oyster. Chuckling Jon shook his head. “Ghost still has quite a bit of growing left to do. He is the second largest of the pups now. My elder brother, Robb’s, direwolf Grey Wind is the largest.”

“And Lord Stark could truly ride the mother if need be?”
“Yes,” he said, nodding, “he could ride Storm like one rides a horse if need be.”

“Quite a majestic image,” Oberyn mused, pausing to watch as the servers returned, heavier entrees covering several platters. After they set them aside, Haig took a moment to refill their wine cups before assisting the other servant with removing the empty dishes. “Bards would sing glorious songs of such a sight if he were to ride his Storm into battle, I am sure.”

“As majestic as that would certainly be,” Jon paused, serving himself one of the new dishes. “I would hope never to witness such a sight.”

“You would not join your father in battle?” Ellaria asked, tilting her head and eying him speculatively.

Given a choice, Jon would never abandon his father or any other member of his family in battle. Somehow, he’d managed to avoid direct battle between Targaryen and Stark forces over his many lives, mostly owing to their common enemy in the form of the Lannisters. He forced a smile onto his face. “I would hope that there need never be a battle of such intensity that my father would lose his horse and find himself needing to use Storm as a steed, my prince.”

“You would not ride your Ghost if you were able?”

“Not if other choices were available to me, my lady,” Jon answered, shaking his head. “My Lord Father once described Storm as a weapon and he was right. I would rather have Ghost at my side, teeth and claws bared, than make a pretty picture for a bard to sing of.”

Ellaria giggled lightly, lips twisting with mirth at the thought, and nodded. “The bards would likely just claim you rode him to war anyway.”

“Bards do tend to exaggerate, helps make the show better and the audience happier than the stark truth does,” Oberyn said, raising his cup to his lips. “And then those that hear it tell it on and the embellishments grow until the tale scarce resembles the truth.”

“But the songs they spin are so much better than the truth,” Jon agreed softly, “more oft than not.”

“Tell me,” the prince leaned in, “what stories if any are told of me in the North?”

Jon took a bite of the entrée he’d chosen, fish with pink-tinged flesh with one side still covered in fire-blackened scales. The prince was known throughout all the kingdoms, though he had heard little about him during this life—that he could remember—besides his relation to the late princess and her children. Most of his knowledge came from his past lives, often told by his daughters and only sometimes the man himself.

“I apologize,” he began, “most the stories I have heard regarding Dorne are older, histories. The story of Queen Nymeria is a favorite of my youngest sister, Arya. She loves the stories of warrior Queens like Nymeria, Visenya, and even Rhaenys.” He saw Oberyn twitch minutely at the last name, the name of Jon’s deceased half-sister. The dark look in the prince’s eyes was enough for him to be sure that, at the very least, she wasn’t in Dorne in this world. Hidden or otherwise. “Of yourself, I heard you spent time with the Second Sons and of your defeat of Willas Tyrell. My elder sister, Sansa, loves stories of southern tourney’s as much Arya though for different reasons.”

“I am saddened to hear no Dornish songs of my prowess—” Ellaria snorted indelicately into her wine. “—have traveled North.”

“Such a shame,” Ellaria said, attempting to hide a grin with her wine cup.
Oberyn shot her a look and then leaned over to steal a kiss. “You have heard the songs.”

“Best we not scare the boy, my love,” she said pulling back after a passionate tangle of lips and tongues. “If I did not know better, I would think you’d been burnt by the sun.” She eyed Jon, whose eyes had wandered towards the starry horizon, as she pulled away from her lover.

“You really should spend some time with the local company, Jon.” Oberyn grinned as he picked up his wine glass again. “They would certainly cure you of that little problem.”

“I have no problem, my prince,” Jon said, lifting his chin and fingering the neck of his wine glass.

“Of course,” Oberyn nodded, turning his attention back to his plate, “your cheeks just flush like a maiden at the whim of the Gods.”

“Lady Stark has always a say in which songs were deemed appropriate when her children are present,” Jon said, attempting to shift the subject, at least somewhat. He knew, could remember, what one did with a woman . . . what he had done countless times with so many different lovers and wives. His young body, however, was a tangled mess of hormones that flushed his veins with fire that was difficult to chill at the oddest and most inconvenient moments. The simple display between the prince and his paramour was enough to remind him of what was out of reach. He’d spent time in pleasure houses before and found them utterly dissatisfying.

“But not you?”

“I didn’t always attend the larger feasts,” he admitted, “but those I did I always followed my brother Robb to bed when he was sent off.”

Oberyn ‘hmmed as he swirlled his wine. “Lady Stark is not fond of you and yet here you sit, bearing the Stark name. How odd.”

“She has come to treat me better in recent years,” Jon let a small smile play on his lips and he shrugged his shoulder. At his side, Ghost lifted his head to stare up at him. “She no longer sees me as a threat to her children.”

Ellaria scoffed and rolled her eyes; her wine cup pinged when she set it down forcefully. “Perhaps if more lords and ladies treated their bastards well they would not be the worry of them usurping trueborn children’s birthrights.”

“A few bad apples,” he replied, meeting her dark eyes.

Her lips quirked at the edges and she gave a slight nod, eyebrow-raising.

Her indeed, Oberyn agreed, glancing down at Ghost as Jon slipped him a slice of what he thought was a type of deer or antelope meat. “I had not heard of your direwolf and its siblings until my arrival here in Braavos. Several individuals at a lovely establishment I frequent when visiting apparently saw him in the market.”

“He does stand out, even in the North,” Jon acknowledged. “He’s not fond of sea travel, else I would have left him on the boat.”

“You did not think to leave him in Winterfell?” Ellaria asked curiously, tucking a dark, curly strand of hair behind her ear, displaying an array of piercings that sparkled in the firelight.

“Ghost would not bear to be left behind.”
“Speaking of stories,” Oberyn began after taking a moment to make a dent in his own meal, “we have heard interesting tales of the North recently in Dorne. Strange and unbelievable tales, truly.”

“Unsurprising,” Jon chuckled, shaking his head slightly. “When telling tales of the North the southern kingdoms tend to embellish things to impossibility. They spread tales of snarks and grumpkins when naught but wildlings are at fault.” Or, more often, the opposite in my experience. “I’m sure they spread fanciful tales of Dorne in other regions as well.”

Oberyn looked at him, brown eyes just watching as he sipped his wine. After a moment, he set his cup down. “Perhaps, but the most recent stories I have heard seem too fantastical to be true.” He paused, eyes drifting to watch Ghost. “Then again, rumors, just as the songs of bards, oft contain a kernel of truth their core.”

“That they do,” Jon couldn’t not acknowledge the truth of the statement. A chill was spreading through his veins, finally, chasing embers and extinguishing them. He shifted his gaze to Ellaria who was watching her lover with an amused glint in her dark eyes as she ate.

“This would have to be a rather large . . . kernel,” Oberyn continued, running a finger over the rim of his half-empty glass. “I wonder if you may be able to help us ferret out the kernel of truth within these rumors?”

“I may be able to. Winterfell is the center of the North, most tales pass through winter town at least and then make their way to the ears of the castle shortly,” he said, placing his knife aside, the fish near gone. He dropped his left hand to where Ghost was leaning against his chair and tangled his fingers in the scruff of the direwolf’s neck. “I was in White Harbor for a short time before setting sail for Braavos. Most rumors make their way there eventually, as well.”

Oberyn traded a glance with Ellaria and then turned back to Jon, a long finger tracing over the rim of his glass. “There are a few different versions that I have heard, and more than likely a few I have not, but nearly all include one particular detail.” He eyed Jon, dark eyes sharp, calculating, watching him closely. “The first rumor I heard said an Ice Dragon was seen at the Wall, flying south, heralding the coming winter. Most take it as stories told by smallfolk to simply describe that a harsh winter may be on its way.”

“They bring a ridiculous tale that the Starks captured a dragon and are keeping it in the crypts of Winterfell,” Ellaria put in, chuckling harshly at ‘captured’.

“Old Nan, a servant at Winterfell, tells many stories,” Jon said, lips quirking in a half-smile at the thought of her. “Including that the hot springs beneath Winterfell are heated by a dragon, but I have been in the crypts and a dragon would find it quite difficult to enter let alone go deep inside it . . . unless it was rather small.” Winter had been in the crypts a few times when she was quite small, but even at her current size, she would certainly balk at having to squeeze through the passageways that narrowed as one went deeper. “There is also a legend that says Prince Jacaerys Velaryon’s dragon, Vermax, laid eggs within the crypts, but none have ever found traces to suggest it to be truth.”

“It could be, like they say, that the stories are told by smallfolk, hearing the words of maesters and the lords warning of the winter and spinning a tale of warning,” Oberyn allowed, lifting his glass. “However,” he paused, latching his eyes onto Jon again, “I did hear a story from a man that said he was delivering supplies to builders near Winterfell. He said it was early in the morning, the sky just beginning to grey, when from the . . . Wolfswood, I believe it is called, he saw a beast flying above the trees. White or silver, he said, with dark wings that stretched longer than his cart.”

“Dragons have been gone for nearly a hundred and fifty years,” Jon said, choosing to take a sip of
wine. He’d already had more than he usually indulged in and with the topic at hand would have to be careful. His five and ten body was not as used to the effects of wine as his full-grown form. “A fantastical tale.”

“You live in Winterfell,” Ellaria eyed him with narrowed eyes, “have you seen this supposed dragon?”

Jon glanced toward her. He had never been good at lying in any life. He could obfuscate the truth, avoid and redirect, but lying was not his strong suit.

“Perhaps you should visit Winterfell and see for yourself the truth of these rumors,” he suggested as he slipped Ghost another scrap. Oberyn’s gaze followed the movement. Ghost pushed himself up; when he sat, he could easily see over the top of the table, staring at the two Dornishmen with eyes that glowed in the flickering torchlight.

Oberyn raised an eyebrow, his dark eyes narrowing. “That is not a no,” he said pointedly.

Saying nothing, Jon continued to eat, taking his time to chew as he watched emotions flit minutely over the prince’s features.

“How?” Oberyn asked finally.

Ellaria’s gaze flickered between them, lips pressed tightly together.

He took a few more bites before speaking, “My prince, if the North has a dragon I doubt the crown would be pleased to hear it.”

“Ha!” Oberyn barked out a laugh. “If anyone had a dragon—no matter what temperature it breathed—the crown nor anyone else would have much say once the beast was large enough.”

“And how long would it take for a dragon to be considered ‘large enough’ to avoid being easily slain?” Jon asked, raising an eyebrow and setting his jaw. “The last dragons were said to have been tiny, sickly creatures.”

“Beasts that were chained and caged,” Oberyn said with a roll of his eyes. He stopped, leaning forward in his chair, setting his fork down with a soft clatter on his plate. “The North, however, is vast and if the rumor is true the dragon has free reign to fly.”

“Do you know much of dragons?”

“Some,” the prince shrugged, lips quirking. “I studied as a maester for a time. Dragons were an interesting subject, though the Citadel had few books on the subject available for perusal. Most tombs that speak of the creatures are of a historical leaning, little of the actual care and biology.”

“A shame.” Jon sighed, hand running over Ghost’s head. It was unsurprising, the maesters by in large despised magic and few deigned to believe of its return until it was too late. Some even tried to snuff it out, poison the minds of men against the dragon’s, the Old Gods—wargs, green seers, anything remotely magical. Much of the blame for the disbelief that often led to most of Westeros being caught unawares at the end could be laid at the steps of the Citadel . . . or the Great Sept.

“What would the Dorne do if the North did have a dragon?”

“I, for one,” Ellaria said, leaning forward, smiling, “would travel to see it.”

Oberyn smiled his agreement and then his lips twisted in thought. “You have two sisters, do you not?” he asked after a long moment.
“Aye,” Jon nodded, drawing back, chin lifting. “Sansa and Arya.”

“My brother has two sons,” Oberyn motioned to the Dornish server who had entered with a platter of pastries and other desserts, Haig behind him, to fill his wine cup, “neither of whom are betrothed as yet.”

“I cannot negotiate betrothals for my siblings,” he said, eyes narrowing. Nor for myself, technically. “You would need to speak with Lord Stark to arrange such things.”

“And my brother,” Oberyn acknowledged, swirling his freshly poured wine. “It was just an observation.”

Sansa had married Prince Quentyn Martell in one life, married off when Kings Landing was captured by Dorne and the Tyrell’s along with Daenerys. Jon had been furious when he’d finally arrived from taking Casterly Rock for his aunt. The only consolation he’d had was that the man was gentle with her and they had grown to care deeply for one another before winter covered the lands in snow and the Night King walked south. He hadn’t been shy about letting his fury known, however, and had been careful in future lives to be clear that any marriage arranged for his cousins would have to meet their, and his, approval or he reserved the right to gut the man.

Perhaps we should,” Ellaria said as she picked up a pastry that looked to be filled with some sort of berry. She paused to taste it, humming her pleasure. Purple juice stained her fingers and bottom lip. She leaned over and fed the rest to Oberyn who licked her finger clean of the sugar as her own tongue slipped out to sweep away the sticky juice from her own lips.

Jon glanced down at Ghost as he toyed with his wine glass. His stomach was full, as was Ghosts, and he needed to let it settle a bit before tasting rich, sugary treats.

“Negotiate a betrothal?” Oberyn asked a moment later, leaning back.

“No,” Ellaria shook her head as her eyes sparkled, “go see for ourselves if the North has a dragon.” She tilted her head at him. “Did you not remark once that you one day wished to see the Wall? We could make a trip of it, perhaps bring some of the girls.” She turned back to Jon. “I heard that there is a new port near Moat Cailin.”

“There is,” Jon confirmed, “and one further up the western coast as well, just before you get to Sea Dragon Point. The one near Moat Cailin is further along in construction, however.”

Oberyn glanced at her thoughtfully. “That would mean returning to Dorne first.”

“My lord father is currently visiting his bannermen with both of my sisters,” Jon spoke up, reaching out for a pastry. He turned it over in his hand, examining the detailed sugar designs that covered the top. “They were not clear in how long they would be away from Winterfell, but it could be several moons.”

“We shall think on it. I have wanted to visit the Wall,” the prince said as he looked over the selection of treats. “I was considering traveling there before returning to Dorne as my brother has recently received multiple requests for resources from the Watch, the Crown, and even your lord father. Is it truly seven hundred feet tall?”

It surprised him, just a bit, but then Dorne had historically contributed least to the Watch, being the furthest away. The cost of sending even prisoners to the Wall was nearly prohibitive in most cases for the southernmost kingdom.

“Aye, it is,” he said and told them then, of the Wall, attempting to keep his stories to that of this
life. He had only a few but described in detail the sunrise and how far one could see from the top of the Wall. After a time, Ellaria spoke up, making excuses to bring the dinner to a close.

As they stood, preparing to leave, Jon cleared his throat. “My prince,” he started, “I wish to offer my condolences over the death of your sister, Elia, and Rhaenys, and . . . Aegon.” Jon trailed off at the end, pausing slightly before speaking his brother's name. He watched as the prince froze, his face becoming a mask, jaw clenching as any previous levity slipped away.

“Lord Stark was outraged when he found out what happened. He would have prevented it if he could have. And, though I was not born yet, I am as well,” Jon said solemnly before the prince could find his voice. “Were it within my power I would see justice done for them.” He watched emotions flash through the prince’s eyes. “If I ever do have the power . . .” Ghost came to stand at his side from where he’d been eating off a platter of leftovers Ellaria had pushed to the edge of the table as they spoke earlier. Jon glanced down at him before raising his eyes to meet Oberyn’s. “I will see justice done. I promise you.” He bowed then before quickly striding from the room, Ghost at his side and Luca falling into behind him.
Late Summer Part VII

The sun was high in the sky, the heat of it beating down upon his skin, as he sat on the hot stone steps as he had for a sennight now. He spent his time whittling away at blocks of wood, making toys and statues. Jon had gotten quite good at the art over the last few lives. Every evening he dropped those he’d finished off at a small shop to be sold and picked up any profits that had been made on them. He’d had a sack full of them when he arrived having spent his free time at the Wall carving them.

Castle Black was gone, breached, by the Free Folk earlier than usual. Lord Commander Mormont had died at the hand of a Wight because Jon had been prevented from saving him by Ser Alliser tossing him in a cell for mouthing off. A dozen brothers had died that night, killed in their sleep by the dead, stopped only by a fire that had killed a dozen more. With many of the leadership gone in one night what remained of the Watch had fled when the wildlings came, abandoning their posts.

He felt a bit guilty, having taken Longclaw from Lord Commander Mormont’s corpse, but the dead man had hardly needed it and he would not have seen it in the hands of Ser Alliser Thorne.

Upon leaving Westeros, Jon had first thought to search out Daenerys or Aegon, but both were dead or non-existent in this life so he had, instead, come here.

Footfalls approached and then he heard a gasp.

Jon glanced up and grey eyes met grey.

“Jon?” Arya asked, eyes wide. Her hair was chopped short and she was dressed as a boy, needle hanging at her hip. One hand clenched around what Jon knew to be a coin.

“Hello, little sister,” he said, smiling slightly. Dropping the half-carved dragon and knife to the ground next to the carving of a wolf, he stood.

Her chin trembled. “Is it really you?” she asked.

“Aye,” Jon said, opening his arms. A moment later she was in them, tears staining his thin shirt and arms tight around his neck. “I missed you.”

Only later would she ask him how he knew where to find her and he would tell a tale, basing it on words from another life, of a lady in red who’d told him where she saw his sister in the flames. He was never good at lying, but was it really lying if it was also the truth; just not the truth of this life?

His stay in Braavos had been extended by several days as he requested Ser Gerik put feelers out through his acquaintances—those he at least somewhat trusted—regarding information that could possibly lead him to the current location of his brother. Jon thought he was likely somewhere on the Rhoyne at this point, but he couldn’t be sure. Every time he caught sight of the ship’s captain his heart hammered in his chest, wondering if this was the time that he’d be bearing news of his half-brother’s whereabouts.

The situation was a gamble, a risk, he knew. If Jon Connington caught word that a Stark was searching for his charge they would disappear like smoke or assassins might be hired to take care...
of the problem. His gut still churned at the dilemma he was facing. Could he search Aegon out only to return to the North? That wasn’t something he had ever done. When he found his brother before the final war in past lives, Jon always abandoned the North to live alongside him. If he did hear word of his brother could he ignore it in favor of returning home to his family? In this life, as of yet, House Stark was still intact.

Ghost, too, seemed affected by it, finding his voice to whine at random moments, pressing tighter against Jon’s side in an attempt to comfort. The dreams he shared with Winter ranged farther and farther East, to the point he’d lost an entire night’s sleep to warg into her and turn her back towards Braavos.

On top of everything else, Jon had to deal with the worry niggling at him after his meeting with Prince Oberyn. He was unsure if he had handled their discussion correctly; if he had revealed too much or too little—likely the former—but outright lying to the prince wasn’t something he could have done. The North would need Dorne as an ally for the Long Night. When the harsh winter snows came very few crops could grow outside of glasshouses and game that did not go south would freeze in the deep snow and freezing temperatures.

In several lives, they had sent those too young, old, or sick to fight south to Dorne or east to Meereen on the boats that delivered supplies to aid those staying to fight the War for Dawn. There were very few lives Jon lived where the White Walkers had ever reached Dorne when he was still alive. Most times the farthest south they reached was the Isle of Faces. Jon could remember in one life, not long before his death, flying above the frozen lake—frozen so quickly it appeared bright blue—on Rhaegal watching as the remaining forces of the living fought the army of the dead.

He needed to believe that they could sway the prince and his family to the North’s side for the war to come. Aegon’s existence, Jon knew, was one point that could, perhaps, help sway Dorne to aid the North. If Aegon could be found and if Jon could convince his brother to join him. He’d have to make sure that his brother, and those that followed him, knew that he had no interest in the Iron Throne.

That was another issue. So long as King Robert sat the throne, Jon felt no need to challenge his rule. His father, too, would not rise up against him unless the king threatened his family. Should Joffrey rise to sit the Iron Throne, however . . . the sadistic bastard ruling when the Long Night came was not an option. The very few times it had happened the realm had suffered for it. Arguably, it was only slightly better when the Iron Bank had backed the mummer Aegon. Even the Mad Queen was a better option as she’d found a new focus for her ire in the Others—although in the end always backstabbed her allies the moment she could to consolidate her power.

Before leaving the city, there were several things Jon still needed to do. He had promised to purchase souvenirs for his siblings and, while he had taken suggestions, he’d already had most of them in mind. One such ‘gift’ was what had brought him here, to a more well-to-do section of the city where wealthy men and woman with trades lived. The home he and his guards stopped in front of was not the grandest, but it was well kept with a few fruit trees inside the outer gate.

A young woman with dark hair and skin, a servant but not a slave, met them at the gate, bowing. “My lord,” she said softly in greeting before letting them in, “you are expected. Follow me, if you will.” She barely spared a glance for Ghost who padded silently at Jon’s side. Two of his guards waited in the entry while Luca followed him and Ghost, his hand near the hilt of his sword as he surveyed their surroundings.

She led them to an inner courtyard, open to the clear blue sky and bright sunlight. There was a walkway and overhang around the outer edge with entrances to multiple rooms. The courtyard
itself was made of even, stone tiles that sparkled a bit in the light. There were multiple weapon racks at the edges, practice weapons and shields of different sizes and types carefully placed away. A few live steel swords of different types also hung upon one.

“It is not often a Westerosi lord offers a Braavosi man a job,” a familiar voice remarked.

Jon turned, looking up to see a man standing in an open doorway. Luca shifted behind him.

Smiling a little, he tilted his head in greeting and acknowledgment. It had been well over a dozen lives since Jon last saw Syrio Forel. “Thank you for agreeing to meet with me, my lord.”

“I am no lord,” Syrio replied as he walked closer. He eyed Jon, eyes drifting to where Ghost had settled on the tile floor near the doorway. “Your request intrigued me.”

“I’m glad it did,” Jon replied honestly. “I’ve heard of your skills, both in battle and as a teacher, as has my lord father.”

“Forgive me,” Syrio started as he came to a stop a few feet away, “but it is not often that I am approached to teach another by one as young as yourself. I have men of all ages requesting my tutelage and yet you do not?”

He smiled a little and shook his head. “I have little doubt I could benefit from your lessons,” he acknowledged, “but I’m not requesting your services for myself and have spent many years learning from skilled fighters in the north. My younger sister, Arya, though, desires to learn swordplay but she is lacking in the size and strength needed to master the styles favored in the North.”

“And you believe my style would be better suited for her?”

“I do,” Jon nodded. “As does my father. He is willing to pay you to teach her to Water Dance . . . and my younger brothers, should they wish to join her. Of course, you would also be free to take on any other students you see fit to. And,” he smiled, “perhaps I shall beg for a lesson or three as well.”

Syrio had been studying him as he spoke, brown eyes seeming to bore into his very soul. He turned, moving aside to one of the weapon racks. “Tell me of Arya Stark.”

Watching the man as he hefted several different swords, Jon searched for the right words. “Arya is . . . wild, spirited. She rebels constantly against what her lady mother and Septa Mordane wish her to do and learn—the duties of a southron lady,” he couldn’t help his smile, “and she often follows me or my brothers to our lessons or begs us to teach her. Lady Stark hates that she does it, but has difficulty wresting control over her to prevent it. She’s built like a dancer and strong from roughhousing with her brothers and other children in the household. She runs from her dancing lessons the Septa gives her as she has no wish to be the lady her mother expects of her.”

“And you do not think she would run from the dancing lessons I would give?” Syrio asked, turning back to him, two wooden practice swords in hand.

“Were you to teach her, she would learn from dawn until dusk if allowed,” Jon said, voice sure. He lifted his chin and met the man’s gaze confidently. “If food and sleep were not necessary for her to function, she would spend all day learning the sword.”

Syrio twirled both blades, one at a time, in each hand. He pressed his lips tight as he worked through a complicated set of footwork until he was but a yard away from Jon. “I received a generous offer from a lord in King’s Landing recently.” He stood straight, feet shoulder-width
apart. “What reason do I have to take your offer instead?”

“I cannot provide you with a better reason than the fact you would not find a more dedicated student than Arya Stark in all of the seven kingdoms,” Jon answered, swallowing. There were times when he wished he had a silver tongue.

“And yet,” Syrio murmured, twirling the left blade again, “King’s Landing has much richer patrons available compared to your Winterfell, does it not?”

Jon nodded, unwilling to lie.

“I will consider your request,” Syrio said after a long moment. “There are still three moons left until my current contract expires. Perhaps I will visit Winterfell and meet your sister before heading south. See for myself the skills of the Northmen.” He hefted the sword in his left hand and then tossed it at Jon.

Jon caught it, shifting forward to grab it by the hilt, automatically adjusting his grip and testing the weight. He looked up at the swordmaster to find the man grinning.

“Now,” Syrio raised an eyebrow, “convince me that I should go North to test my skills against your father’s men.”

Jon leaned heavily against the wall, holding onto his side and breathing deep. Somehow, he’d managed to make it here first he realized as he saw his little sister sparring with her dancing master. Pushing himself upright, he stumbled into the room. Ghost was at his side and if it wasn’t for him Jon didn’t think he’d have made it.

“Jon?!” Arya gasped, dropping her sword as she ran to him. He couldn’t help but lean against her a little, he removed his hand from his side and held her head so he could drop a kiss to the crest of it, meeting the frowning Syrio Forel’s gaze above her head. She pulled back and stared at him, worry stark in her wide grey eyes. “What happened? You need maester!” She tried to examine his wound but he drew back.

Nymeria had bounded over to meet her brother and, sniffing the blood around his jowls, she let out a soft growl.

He smiled sadly at Arya. “Don’t worry about me, sweet girl.” Jon looked up at Syrio again. “I know it’s much to ask, but if you could get her away from here, north to Winterfell or White Harbor, or even to Riverrun or the Vale, my family would owe you a great debt.”

The man’s dark eyes watched him, lips tight. Jon knew his father had spoken with him recently, paid him for more than just these lessons. A backup plan that Jon had convinced him of.

“I have a way,” he said after a moment.

“You need to hurry,” Jon said, wincing as he pressed his hand back against his side, removing Needle from his belt and handing it to her. The sword in his other hand was resting against the ground like a crutch. He looked down at it and then back up at Syrio. “Do you have a weapon?”

“I do,” the man disappeared into a side room before quickly returning.
“Jon,” Arya’s lip was quivering, her brow furrowed as she took her sword, “what’s going on?”

“Father’s been arrested. You need to go with Syrio now,” he said, cupping her cheek. He winced when he saw he left a smudge of blood on her pale skin.

“What about you?”

“Just go, please,” he repeated. “I’d slow you down.” His strength was waning.

“We must go now,” Syrio said.

“Ghost,” Jon murmured and his companion turned his red eyes toward him, knowing. “Take care of her.”

“Jon . . .” Arya called as Syrio pulled her from the room, Nymeria and Ghost following them swiftly. He watched them until they disappeared around a corner.

Only a couple of minutes later the main door slammed inward, armored boots entered noisily. Jon turned to face the men who entered, their eyes trailing about the room.

In the short time he had, Jon had torn a piece of his cloak and fastened it tightly around his middle, binding his injury. He was still bleeding, the wound deep, but the pressure of the bandage would give him a bit of time. Hefting his sword, he narrowed his eyes.

“Where are your sisters, bastard?” Ser Meryn Trant scowled at him.

Jon shrugged. “Not here.” Drugged and on a ship to White Harbor with Septa Mordane and Jeyne Poole . . . and running with Syrio Forel. In this life they, at least, they wouldn’t be used as hostages against Robb. Lady Stark wouldn’t have need to free Jaime Lannister. He eyed the men as they surrounded him.

Even with his injury, they wouldn’t find him an easy enemy to kill.
Late Summer Part VIII

Jon glanced sideways at Luca and sighed. His guard had a grin on his face, almost smirking, and had since they’d left Syrio Forel’s home. Though he’d fought well, Jon had been soundly defeated by the swordmaster after a long bout and he had quite a few bruises to show for it. It hadn’t been a complete disaster, but Jon was still growing in spurts and while very, very good for his age, his body still had much to master. Every year he was able to work more of his past knowledge into his swordplay as his strength and reach slowly increased. The tricks and maneuvers he commonly used as a man grown were finally within his grasp to be able to use against the majority of his opponents. He was even able to give his guardsmen a challenge, able to best full-grown men every third time at least. Luca often japed that Jon should be his guard.

Syrio Forel, however, had not been given the title of ‘First Sword of Braavos’ without reason.

“What will you give Arya should he decide not to teach her?” Luca asked as they walked side by side through the street. Two other guards were behind them and Ghost wandered nearby on Jon’s left, sometimes stopping to sniff at things, but always alert.

“Robb and Sansa may complain—” In jest, of course. At least on Robb’s part. “—but the sword I had commissioned on our first day is also for her.”

“Not the dagger?” Luca asked, brow-raising as he glanced at Jon.

He shook his head. “No. The dagger is for Sansa.”

“Convincing the little lady to learn to use it won’t be easy,” Gomer remarked behind them as they turned down a side street, heading towards the blacksmith they had stopped at that first day.

“No, it won’t be,” he acknowledged, glancing back at the man, but he would manage it. With Robb and father’s help, he was sure he could convince her. Jon knew that Lady Catelyn knew her way around a dagger; he’d seen her use it in previous lives often enough. With her knowledge of what was to come, he was surprised she hadn’t already insisted on Sansa learning. Then again, Sansa had always been the most sheltered of all the Stark children, the most protected. She often shied away from weapons time and again. Jon couldn’t even think of a time she’d touched one outside of admiring the hilt of his Valyrian steel dagger. At least in this life.

He could still vividly remember her sick up, pale-faced and quaking full-bodied the time she’d stabbed King Joffrey in the neck when he attempted to accost her in her chambers. They tried but hadn’t made it out of King’s Landing before they were caught.

He was turning back to say something to Luca when he heard Gomer and the other guard curse and their footsteps falter.

Something slammed into his side and he reflexively grabbed it. A small boy, perhaps six or seven was staring at the ground, a dark arm tried to jerk away from Jon’s grip. The boy was mumbling apologies as fast as he could. “I’m sorry, milord! I’m sorry!” He lifted his wide, brown eyes up towards him, bottom lip trembling. “I was tryin’ to catch up to my brother,” his eyes darted down the ally, back the way they came.

Jon followed the boy’s gaze and saw a couple of older boys frozen at the end of the street. One shared the same dark curly hair and pointed nose and chin as the child in his grasp. He narrowed his eyes and looked back at the boy he held. Reaching down and stooping slightly, he retrieved his
regular steel dagger from the boy’s shirt, being careful not to nick him as the boy hadn’t been able to lift the sheath as well. Jon handed it to the guard behind him as the boy flushed.

“Stealing is illegal and dangerous,” Jon said, pressing his lips together.

The boy stared down at his feet and gulped audibly before looking back up through his fringe. “I won’t do it again, milord.”

“I have no doubt that you will,” Jon said as he patted himself down, checking each of his hidden weapons and his coin and other valuables quickly. He frowned as he slid his finger into the dagger’s sheath last. Using two fingers he pinched a thin piece of paper shoved within and removed it.

The boy gasped as Ghost stepped next to him from wherever the wolf had gotten to and growled.

“Don’t move,” Jon said as he let the boy’s arm go. The boy followed his instructions, staring at the white wolf. He had guts, the boy did, as he had to have known that the direwolf was Jon’s companion.

Unfolding the paper Jon frowned as he read it. The first part of the letter standing out startlingly clear:

*The maid you seek will be found where the mother is meeting the first daughter. She waits expectantly, though shy. Take care in your approach else she may slip away.*

He stared at it, reading it several times over and scanning the rest of the note as well. Finally, he glanced up at the nervous boy, brow raised and lips pressed tight. The boy watched him warily.

Jon reached into his pocket and retrieved a silver coin, tossing it to the boy who caught it, startled.

“Tell your master thank you, little bird,” he said, voice cool as ice. “Tell him, also, that I will not dance to his fife like a trained bird.”

The boy swallowed heavily, tucking the coin into his pocket, before nodding enthusiastically. “Yes, milord!”

“Good, now get.” He jerked his chin in the direction where the older boys stood, still poised to run.

The boy glanced wearily at Ghost before sidling around the direwolf and running off.

Jon glanced at the guards behind him with a raised brow and then he looked down at Ghost.

“Bloody wolf rammed into me,” Gomer grumbled to him, glaring at Ghost.

Ghost blinked placidly up at the guard and then swiveled his head to Jon, jaw-dropping in the approximation of a grin. Jon narrowed his eyes at his companion. The direwolf had recognized the boy, he knew suddenly. Though Jon himself couldn’t remember ever meeting him. He had understood or overheard that the child had no ill wishes towards Jon, just wished to deliver a message and had worked to aid the boy without the child knowing.

He was suddenly more impressed by the boy’s courage. The child had no way of knowing Ghost wouldn’t have attacked him.
“This won’t happen again,” Jon said, sighing, as he turned to Luca.

The man had a dark expression on his face as he stared at the two guards behind him. His sword had been out since the moment the boy had slammed into Jon, but he’d stayed it within seconds, realizing that the child was not a true danger.

“No,” Luca agreed, “it won’t.”

Jon didn’t envy the training he knew his other guards were going to be put through in the coming weeks. He glanced down at the slip of paper in his hand and folded it, slipping it into a safe place among his clothes.

“Bloody smart wolf,” Luca said, glancing down at Ghost as he sheathed the sword. “He knew that boy had a message for you somehow, didn’t he?”

“Aye,” Jon said, nodding sharply, eyes shifting around the street, “he did. We need to get going. I want to leave port as soon as it can be arranged.”

“It’ll be good to see the North again,” his third guard said.

Jon glanced back at him and then, fist-clenching, back down at Ghost. The direwolf looked back up at him knowingly. “We aren’t going back to White Harbor . . . not yet.”

“Where then?” Luca asked, surprised.

He looked at his sworn sword for a long moment and then shook his head. “I’ll explain later. First, let us do what we came here to do.”

Ser Gerik frowned down at the slip, lips pressed tight, as he read it over. He raised an eyebrow as he looked up at Jon. “Volantis. It’s referring to Volantis.”

“That’s what I thought as well,” Jon agreed, wetting his lips.

They were in the Captain’s cabin, a map of Essos spread between them; Ghost laying upon a thick rug in front of the knight’s bed. If he wanted to find Aegon, and this might be his only chance to do so before politics in Westeros became too dangerous to leave. His heart ached, pulled in two different directions . . . if he chose to go, Ser Gerik would have to agree to take him.

The knight sighed. “You wish to find your half-brother and you believe this is the way.”

“I do,” Jon glanced at the paper. “I trust that the Iron Bank is correct when they say he is alive and . . . I—I can’t explain why but I know he is likely to be traveling the Rhoyne. This,” he nodded to the slip, “makes sense.”

“And yet you cannot be sure who sent it or why.”

He was sure it was Varys, but no, Jon couldn’t be sure what motivations the man had for sending it. The Master of Whispers had, however, in every life served either House Targaryen or House Blackfyre. Usually, in Jon’s experience, the former. The latter generally seemed more of a backup plan if Daenerys and Viserys fell through—and Viserys always fell.

Jon wished he could say he was surprised that Varys knew of him, but the man had his ways and,
for all that Jon had tried to help his father rid the North of spies, the little birds were the hardest to get rid of.

“What if the sender aims to get Winter into the hands of . . . Aegon?” Ser Gerik asked as he set the paper onto the table. “Give her to their puppet?”

“I . . . Winter won’t.” Jon was sure of it. As much as he cared for Aegon, unlike Ghost, she had never met him. She cared for Robb, Arya, and his other Stark siblings. “If I fall she’ll return to Winterfell . . . to the North. The Wall if nowhere else.” Maester Aemon was there and she adored the old man.

Ser Gerik sighed, rubbing at his beard. “Your father, Lord Stark, spoke with me before we set sail,” he said after a long moment, leaning back in his chair. “We fought together during the Greyjoy rebellion, he and his men saved me and mine.” He paused, standing and making his way over to a desk set against a window-lined wall. “He knew what might happen if you received word of your brother, my lord. Knew what you would want to do.” Gerik glanced over his shoulder at Jon. “He made me swear an oath to see to your safety until you return to the North . . . no matter if the trip took us to Braavos and back or resulted in a jaunt across Essos.” Unlocking a drawer, the knight retrieved two scrolls. “There are two copies of this, both sealed. Lord Stark asked me to give this to you only if we went in search of Aegon Targaryen.”

His jaw dropped in surprise and he found himself searching for words. “So . . .” Jon trailed off as Ser Gerik set the letters on the table in front of him.

“So, we’ll look for your dragon brother if you wish, my lord,” Ser Gerik said, pointing a long, scarred and calloused finger to the map, to Volantis, “and we’ll start there.”

“Thank you—” he started as he took the letters in hand, eyes locked on the Stark sigil set into hardened wax.

“But,” Ser Gerik’s eyes narrowed, “we won’t leave for two days. I need to arrange for cargo that will keep us fed until then and provide a reason for sailing to Volantis. If we’re going,” he paused, “we’re going to have a reason to back it up. Less suspicious that way.”

Jon swallowed and nodded. His gut was churning and insides screaming that they should leave now, but his mind knew the man was correct. “All right,” he agreed with a nod, “is there anything you wish me to do?”

“Finish your business in Braavos if you have any and then stay aboard ship,” he said, moving to stand. “We’ll leave as soon as we can and I don’t want to have to go searching or have you get in unnecessary trouble.” He pressed his lips tight. “If one person knows who you are then others might as well.”

Standing, Jon nodded, grabbed the letter, and turned to leave, Ghost getting up to follow him.

“My lord,” the man called, just before Jon opened the door. He glanced back at the captain. “With this news, I nearly forgot. One of my men heard a rumor that the Targaryen princess wed a Dothraki Khal, perhaps a moon ago. I thought you would wish to know.”

“Thank you, Ser Gerik,” Jon said, throat suddenly dry. He forced a smile. “I hope that it will be a happy marriage for her.” He turned and opened the door, mentally trying to estimate how long it would be before Khal Drogo normally fell to infection or another death—to when Daenerys would hatch her dragons.
Ghost slipped out ahead of him, into the late afternoon sun and Jon blinked up at it. There was still so much to do and yet so little time before autumn arrived.
The tall grass drifted in the wind, a soft sound that sung to his ears, murmuring words just out of reach of his understanding. Ghost plodded next to him, winding silently around the occasional obstacle. Jon smiled down at him and then squinted into the distance. He was sweating under the high sun, for all that he had exchanged his northern garb for something friendlier to the heat, it still beat down harshly against his skin. If it wasn’t for his heritage, Jon was sure his skin would be bright and aching, flaking off like ashes or snow.

The horse beneath him was the closest to a Dothraki warhorse he could purchase with the coin in his pocket upon his arrival to Pentos. It had saddened him to think he had missed Daenerys’ marriage by several moons, but he’d first gone to Castle Black before changing his mind, days before swearing his vows.

He was tired of the castle and his black brother’s betrayal, each life he tried to maneuver the Night’s Watch into accepting the Free Folk early only to fail . . . he didn’t want to witness Ygritte’s death in yet another life. Perhaps it was selfish, but Jon didn’t want to witness an arrow or dagger slide into her heart again. He didn’t want to feel the tearing burn of one sliding through his own skin. Not again. Not in that manner.

Jon was traveling in the general direction he knew Khal Drogo’s Khalasar traveled in most lives, following an old trail of bentgrass from the hooves of horses and feet of slaves. It grated on him when he found his way into the horse lord’s retinue, the slavery, but there was nothing to be had if he wanted to stand at his aunt’s side.

“What do you think, Ghost?” he murmured into the breeze. His direwolf’s ears flicked, his nose remained inches above the bentgrass. “Was I stupid for coming this way?”

Jon didn’t expect an answer but wasn’t surprised wave of comfort and love that swirled at the edge of his mind. He smiled a bit, lips twisting.

Ghost was his ever-faithful companion in this harsh, broken twine of fate that Jon had found himself locked into. His only true companion.

A scream caught his ears and Jon’s head darted up and to the left, jaw clenching. He shouldn’t. He shouldn’t. He shouldn’t.

But he would.

Ghost was staring, already several paces towards the direction whence the scream came.

“If we die,” Jon told him as he turned his horse, “we are going to see whether winter makes it to the Summer Isles.”

Ghost glared back at him and huffed, red eyes glinting in the sunlight.

Jon sighed and drew his sword, one Mikken had made back at Winterfell. Its edge was sharp and, in this life, as yet unbloodied.

“Well, boy,” Jon said, “lead on.”
The two days passed quicker than Jon expected, he had Ghost had only made one more trip into the city in order to pick up some small trinkets for Rickon and something more ladylike for Sansa. She’d frown at the dagger, he was sure, but the silk cloth he’d found was her favorite color and she was sure to squeal in delight at the opportunity to make it into whatever she wished. He’d made sure to purchase more than enough to make a full dress.

He even picked up some small gifts for little Robin, an intricately carved and painted statue of bird of prey native to Essos that reminded him of House Arryn’s emblem, and a little set of bronze throwing knives that were so polished they glinted in the light. The boy had been slowly gaining strength before he left Winterfell and Jon hoped that his separation from Lady Lysa and Littlefinger would continue to benefit him.

The morning they set sail, as early as the tide would allow, Jon stood at the side of the ship and watched until they were far enough at sea that they could barely see land and they’d left most of the local fishing boats behind. It was only once there were no vessels in sight that Winter dropped down from the sky where she’d been but a speck he could barely see. She swooped about the ship, the tip of her wings passing close enough to touch the crest of the waves.

As she swept over the wake of the ship, Winter screeched and dug her claws into the water, snagging a porpoise from where it had been following in the wake of the ship. She flapped and spun, climbing back into the air and, once far enough up, she tossed it above her and quickly breathed fire upon it before snatching it in her jaws.

She seemed even larger than before the parted last, barely able to fit upon the spot the crew had cleared for her on the boat when she settled down a moment later to munch away.

Jon approached her with a smile and she eyed him, their mental connection conveying how happy she was to see him again. “Hey girl,” he said as he approached, moving to her neck and where she had folded her wings tight against herself. He leaned against her, hands running over the growing spines on her neck. He was able to wrap his hands around all of them, but some it was getting close.

Ghost padded up to her and huffed, sniffing at one of her claws.

Winter glared back as if to say: ‘Get your own’.

“She’s gorgeous,” Ser Gerik said from several yards off, watching as Jon checked her over for any injuries. He knew mentally that she was fine, but couldn’t help but check. Her scales shined, glittering in the sunlight, the blue sheen on the spines, edges of scales, and across her wings seemed more vibrant than before. Even the midnight blue that lined the upper edges of the span where the leathery wings met bone.

He grinned, glancing at the Captain. “Aye, that she is.”

“It’s a good thing she can feed herself,” Ser Gerik continued, scratching at his beard with a contemplative look. A long scar ran from his left cheek and through the gray hairs to the cleft of his chin, which his fingers traced. “We wouldn’t have room to store enough for both her and your Ghost.”

Ghost shifted to stare at the man who chuckled.

“Both of ‘em are too smart, my lord,” he shook his head, “too bloody smart.”
Jon had to agree with Ser Gerik’s assessment of the food situation . . . but also Winter was becoming too big for transport on their vessel if one included her wingspan. Upon landing the captain had sent some of his crew down to the hold, ordering them to shift the weight of the cargo to account for her. The vessel and shifted under her weight on the waves, leaning it more to one side.

Winter was oblivious to the crew around her as she crunched on the remnants of the porpoise’s tale, closing her third eyelid as Jon’s fingers found a particular spot. She started a moment later, jerking away from him and emitting a hissing noise, a bone dropped to the ground and into the mess of blood she had left. A moment later a tooth plopped down into the muck as well. The dragon shut her mouth for a moment, shifting her jaw, eyeing Jon.

Reaching down he picked it up. He’d have to clean it off before he placed it in his chest, it was covered in gore. As he glanced back at her, she went back to her meal. This wasn’t her first tooth loss, as Winter grew her teeth fell out and replaced themselves repetitively, growing with her. Sometimes she swallowed them and other times, like just now, she spat them out, giving them to him.

Somehow it had become a tradition for him to give each of his siblings one of her teeth. Jon frowned at her and raised an eyebrow. Winter just stared back. He’d already given Robb, Sansa, Arya, Bran, and Rickon a talisman of one of her teeth. Even his father and Lady Catelyn had one. He planned to send one north, to Castle Black, for Maester Aemon one day soon. Perhaps this one. They were sharp enough they could be used as a weapon if need be—though he hadn’t told Sansa that.

“Damn, that’s a big tooth,” one of the riggers whistled from off to the side.

“Just imagine the size of her teeth when she’s as big as this boat!” Another commented down the way.

“Seven Hells!”

Jon couldn’t help the grin that crept on his face and he stepped back to settle an arm along her back. She was warm, radiating a blistering heat against the cool sea breeze drifting down from the north, and a comforting presence that he’d missed during the last week.

Ghost edged around her and sniffed at her tail only to plop down next to it with a whine as the ship rocked a bit more than usual. Winter glanced back at the direwolf as she finished off the rest of her meal, curling her tail around the wolf a bit more. He huffed at her and settled his chin on the scaled appendage, red eyes slit open to watch the passing crew.

Ghost had missed her, too.
Late Summer Part X

They were lucky, only one late summer storm rocked the Golden Trident as they passed through the narrow sea near King’s Landing. It was a relatively minor storm and it did no damage to the ship except to cause a single rope to snap that was quickly replaced. There had been enough warning of its arrival for Winter to fly ahead of the Storm, disappearing towards Essos until the sky cleared again.

The arrival of the storm had worried him, but Ser Gerik had assured him that by all accounts they would be able to make it back North before the autumn storms began to sweep through the sea, so long as they lingered no more than three moons in Volantis. Still, he worried. Every day they were closer to possibly meeting his brother, but also farther from the North and he had heard no word of the situation at home since leaving White Harbor.

When the weather was good and the deck mostly clear and somewhat dry, Jon and his guards—and sometimes members of the crew—took turns sparring on the afterdeck. A few times spars would spill towards middeck, to Ser Gerik’s shouts and the crew’s laughter, and one memorable time Jon and Luca had ended up at the bow.

Outside of sparring, Jon spent much of his time immersed in the studies his father and Maester Luwin had insisted on setting him, practicing his Valyrian dialect—specifically the one spoken in Volantis—and helping the riggers or deckhands with their duties. He kept himself as busy as possible to help quell the churning in his guts and take his mind off the circling memories of his half-brother.

“I suppose we do,” Tyrion acknowledged with a nod. “More than one, even, as I doubt King Euron Greyjoy will ignore the North for long . . .” He glanced at Jon, questioningly. “If he hasn’t begun raiding your shores already.”

Jon pressed his lips, trying to prevent a scowl. “My lords have reported chasing Ironborn off our western shore in a few places over the last half-year or so,” he admitted. “They weren’t raiding in the traditional sense. They were logging.”

“To make more ships,” Tyrion said with a sigh.

“Aye,” he nodded, “more than likely.” He didn’t feel the need to add that they’d found them only because the North was working on a fleet of their own. The places the Ironborn had been logging were sparsely populated, but easy to transport the felled trees to the shore. “We have spared little mind to them, outside of reinforcing the keeps and towns along the coasts and manning forts. The North has had other foes to deal with, unfortunately.”

“And deal with them you have,” Tyrion acknowledged as they stepped off the dock and onto the road that would lead from the small port town up to the Dragonmont. “Our Houses may have been at war, still are though my loyalties lay with my Queen and not my family now, but I wish to offer you my condolences. Your father, brother, and Lady Stark did not deserve their deaths. To be killed at a wedding,” he shook his head sadly, “was an especially abhorrent act that my father helped orchestrate.”
Jon smiled sadly in response. “Thank you. Lord Stark, Lady Stark, and King Robb’s deaths have been avenged . . . for the most part.” He glanced up at the sky as they walked up the path; his gaze caught on a spec in the distance and he realized as it whirled in the air, glinting dark against the sky, it was Drogon. He could hear his men and Tyrion’s footfalls behind them. Ghost brushed against his side as the path narrowed a bit. “House Bolton is gone, the Dreadfort has a new lord. House Frey’s male line has been eradicated but for King Robb’s former squire and he has sworn an oath to House Stark and House Tully.” He shifted his gaze back to Tyrion. “The man who executed my father lost his head in the middle of the night, or so I heard, and you—you shot Lord Tywin on his . . . chamber pot.”

“It seemed as good a place as any.” Tyrion’s lip quirked darkly at the edges.

“Lady Sansa has spoken of you, Lord Tyrion, and what you did for her,” Jon said. “House Stark holds no ill will towards you. You were a victim of your House just the same as much of the realm has been.”

“Do your lords and ladies hold with your opinions?” Tyrion asked, raising the brow above his green eye.

“My lords and ladies trust Lady Sansa’s word as much as I do,” he said, pressing his lips together. “Do not misunderstand me, my lord. It is only you that we hold no ill will for. Queen Cersei needs to be removed from the Iron Throne and your brother . . . justice will be called for.”

Tyrion glanced at him questioningly.

“He pushed Bran from the broken tower, hoping he would die for what he saw within,” Jon said sharply. “I would have his head if given the opportunity.”

“You’re sure of it?” Tyrion asked.

“He remembers it clearly now.”

“Bran Stark is alive?!”

“Aye,” Jon glanced at him, face an icy mask.

“Yet you’re King in the North?”

“Bran refused it,” he answered simply, not wishing to go into detail. Rickon . . . was young and wild if he still lived. If they did find him Jon planned to offer the crown to him, though, when he was older if he wished it. The fact that the youngest Stark was likely alive was not something he planned to mention to anyone on this trip. Sansa had refused at the time on grounds that taking the crown in such a way left her more open to Littlefinger’s machinations, but he was dead now. Tried and beheaded for the murder of Lyssa Arryn, King Joffrey Waters, and a half dozen others. Sansa herself had swung Longclaw, ending the man’s trail of dark deeds and hatred of their family that had begun long ago, when their Uncle Brandon scarred him. “He advised us he wishes to marry Meera Reed once things have settled. Lord Reed’s male heir is dead and he not only adores her but feels obligated as he blames himself for Jojen’s death,” he said honestly. “Also, it is unclear if he can have an heir.” Or if he would ever travel south of the Wall again. He bore the Night King’s brand and was unwilling to tempt fate and pass by the magical barriers that had kept the Wall standing so long.

“So, Winterfell will fall to a bastard line . . .” Tyrion mused.

Jon scowled. “Winterfell will go to one of Sansa’s children.” He glanced back up at the sky,
scanning for any of the other dragons. He no longer wished to speak of this, it wasn’t any of the
dwarf’s business. Not yet. “The Lannister’s have no right to the Iron throne. They conquered it
through lies and murder, by cuckolding King Robert. The North will not support a Lannister
dynasty for that reason and for the crimes they perpetrated upon House Stark and House Tully.”

“But you would support a Targaryen dynastic revival?”

Jon chuckled, a faint smile upon his lips. “Lord Eddard was revolted when King Aegon’s supposed
skull was smashed in as a babe and Princess Rhaenyss and her mother murdered. He was outraged
at the idea of King Robert planning to assassinate Queen Daenerys when she was pregnant with
Khal Drogo’s babe.” He paused as they reached the castle gates and turned toward Lord Tyrion.
“When he found his sister Lyanna he freed her only to find her dying. When she passed, rather
than meet Robert in King’s Landing for his coronation, he went first to Starfall and then North
with his sister’s body to lay her to rest. It was never the Targaryens as a whole he had issue with.
It was King Aerys’ murder of his father and brother and Prince Rhaegar’s actions that he disliked.
I’m sure King Aegon at least may hold some understanding about the latter. It was his Prince
Rhaegar’s choices that led to his mother’s death, after all.”

As they continued walking, Tyrion sighed and shook his head. “I sometimes find myself thinking
how unbelievable that it was Robert that ended up on the throne.”

“Why?” Jon asked.

“Jon Arryn would have been a much better ruler,” Tyrion answered quickly. “Even your father
would have been, I am quite sure. Even my lord father had a better mind for ruling.” He glanced
sidelong at Jon. “Robert Baratheon was extremely inept and quite . . . a lush. The Kingdom would
have fallen to ruin at the hand of the Iron Bank eventually. May well still, if it remains in my
sister’s hands.”

“He had the closest claim,” Jon pointed out. “Not only through conquest but also through blood.
House Baratheon’s blood ties to House Targaryen bought him support—begrudging in some cases,
I suppose, but still support.”

Tyrion made a small noise at the back of his throat. “Ah, yes, people do tend to forget House
Baratheon’s long-standing connections to House Targaryen. King Robert himself included, I
believe.”

“I’ve found knowing our Houses connections and lineages quite helpful recently.” Jon’s eyes
carried upon green and gold as they swooped above towards the far side of the castle. Once they’d
disappeared he found himself examining the towers and cliffs, eyes focusing on each stone dragon
one at a time.

“Spectacular, isn’t it?” Tyrion asked as they passed through the gate.

Jon nodded as his eyes slid over the intricate stone statues.

“If only the secrets of how they built this place had not been lost.”

“Legend states that dragon fire had a part to play, does it not?” he asked.

The shorter man eyed him and nodded.

“Then perhaps the secret can be rediscovered through Queen Daenerys’ dragons with time.”

Behind them, there was a startled yell and Jon glanced up just in time to see Drogon sweep low
over them. Ser Davos and Jon’s guards ducked low while the King and Queen’s men, Tyrion, and Jon himself watched the dragon swoop away.

Tyrion was eying him when Jon finally pulled his gaze away from the large dragon’s form as it disappeared around a cliff.

“Your Queen, and King, will find I don’t intimidate so easy.”

“Easy?!” Tyrion asked, incredulous.

“They’ll find the North, nay the realm, has much bigger, and more frightening, threats to worry over than dragons.”

“How long until you can ride her?” Haig asked one evening when they were watching some of the crew place small bets on a game being played with rows of small, chipped tiles on the after deck. Jon had played in a few lives, but he was never all that good at it. It involved both strategy and luck . . . and the occasional alliance as this particular set allowed for six players as some of the pieces had been lost to the seventh. He preferred Cyvase when it came to games.

Jon glanced up, catching sight of Winter as she whirled overhead. “I probably could now,” he replied honestly.

“Why haven’t you then,” Haig stared at him, startled, before adding a belated, “milord?”

“Not really the best place to, is it?” Jon shrugged, glancing out to the sea.

“Wouldn’t it be better to try flying over water than over land?” Haig asked, brow furrowing. “Seems like it’d hurt less if you fell.”

“Aye,” Jon laughed, “it might.” He raised an eyebrow. “And I wouldn’t mind taking a first flight on the coast . . . but amid the open sea?”

“I hadn’t thought of that . . . can you swim, my lord?”

Jon nodded. He didn’t like to, but he could. Drowning wasn’t fun . . . he perhaps disliked it more than burning even. It certainly always felt like his lungs were on fire at the end when it happened. “Aye, my father taught me and my brother when we were little in the Godswood.”

“Gwelda told me I should learn,” Haig said after a beat of silence. A flush rose high on the young man’s cheeks as he glanced away, focusing on the raucous of another player being pushed out of the game by the other three remaining ones after his Hearth tile was taken by a Stranger tile. This round had started with five players. “I didn’t have the time before we left, though.”

“You should,” Jon told him. “On the way back to Winterfell we can see about stopping at a few tributaries on the White Knife. There’s a few good spots to spend an evening splashin’ about. If nothing else to get rid of the stink of the road. We can go over the basics, at least.” He smiled a bit, remembering his sister’s complaints—mostly Sansa—of the scent associated with a long trek and where warm baths or any baths, really, were a rare pleasure.

“Thank you, my lord.” Haig smiled sincerely.
Ghost rolled over then, stretching his legs out and moving to rest his muzzle on Jon’s right boot. His tail flopped idly as a passing crewman narrowly avoiding stepping on it or his hind paws.

“And thank you,” Haig continued, “for teaching me how to use the sword. It’s not something I thought I would ever learn.”

“Every man,” and woman, he thought, “should learn to protect themselves,” Jon glanced down at Ghost, nudging his foot up and down a bit. He felt the direwolf’s annoyance at the back of his mind, “and their loved ones. A servant, a woman, a child . . . all can make the difference in an ambush or a battle.”

“Still,” the man examined the wooden practice sword he still held in his hand after their bout earlier, “while I’ll never be as good as you or Luca . . . any of the guards . . . it makes me feel . . .” Haig trailed off as if unsure of the words.

“Aye, it does,” Jon agreed, glancing at him with a small smile. “I’ll let you in on a secret.”

Haig glanced at him.

He leaned in and mock whispered, “Practice. If Gomer didn’t he’d be fifty pounds heavier and unable to hit the broadside of a barn.”

“Oi!” Gomer called, looking up from where he had been staring at his tiles. His warrior tile was just shy of two of a rigger’s newly revealed knights.

“You know it’s true,” Kyne called laughing from where he sat nursing a mug of ale after his loss in the last round. “I’ve met your family.”

Gomer scowled at him but was cut off before he could speak as one of the other men crowed in triumph, sliding a mother tile towards him. He stared at it and flipped over one of his own to reveal a smith. Scowling, he slid it over to the man who took it, placed it upside down in the pile of his unused tiles and shifted them together quickly before moving one onto the board, upside down, in place of the mother tile.

“You should pay better attention,” the rigger said with a grin. “Else you’ll be out that silver.”

“Honestly, he shouldn’t even have bet,” Kyne said earning another dark look. “I doubt there’s a single set of tiles outside of White Harbor in the North.”

“It’s not that hard,” Gomer grumbled as he arranged two more tiles onto his section of the grid, one upside down and one upright. He’d placed a knight near his warrior and the upside-down tile between a third opponent's face-down tile and his Hearth.

“Do you even know what all the pieces mean?”

Jon chuckled at the banter and glanced up at the sky, gauging the height of the sun. If Ser Gerik was correct, and when it came to sea travel he usually was, tomorrow they would arrive at Volantis. The aching worry was growing in his gut as weighed his options, formulating plans of action. If all went well tomorrow he may very well see his brother again; for the first time in this life.
Late Summer Part XI

Volantis was not a city Jon had visited often, nor was it one he had ever sought out before. The few times he’d visited the city he’d done so at Aegon’s side as they made their way to Meereen or prepared to set sail for Westeros.

The Golden Trident docked on the coastal side of the port and the captain promptly met with the dockmaster to provide an accounting of trade goods—and other items so the man could at least pretend do his part to prevent black market trade and collect tariffs—before they could disembark the ship. Before they left port, another inspection would be done and any taxes and tariffs required by the city would be requested.

It was nearing dusk when Jon, Luca, Gomer, and Kyne ventured down the gangplank. Ghost had growled softly at him, vocalizing his opinion, a rarity, as he paced the length of the ship. He didn’t like leaving his companion behind, but his presence would likely do more harm than good in this meeting.

The Golden Trident had already been docked for near half a day, Ser Gerik having sent men and reached out to some contacts within the city to confirm the information Jon had received from the little bird in Braavos.

They forewent the garb they’d donned in Braavos, leaving Stark colors and symbolism behind for at least the time being. Jon had donned an outfit of mostly black, with a few white accents, along with a nice, but unmarked Northern armor that matched his guards.

They ate a simple meal, Jon’s stomach was uneasy with nerves, before leaving the ship.

“How do you wish to play this, my lord?” Luca had asked as Jon finished the last bites of porridge.

The ship was currently flying House Manderly’s sigil and colors, rather than the Stark emblem they’d flown into Braavos. Jon and Ser Gerik had both agreed on the decision. House Stark didn’t have a merchant fleet of their own; Winterfell was landlocked and their bannermen handled the North’s trade vessels. While the North rarely sent vessels as far as Slaver’s Bay, it wasn’t unheard of. Ser Gerik had certainly traveled this way often enough for more exotic goods over the years.

Running a hand through his hair, he’d sighed. “The truth perhaps,” Jon had murmured. Or close to it, at least. In previous lives, where he’d not thought to try and tell the mad tale of his man lives, he’d always spun stories to help gain his brother—and Lord Connington’s—ear long enough to convince him that he held no ill will towards his brother. Now though, Ser Gerik and his lord father had accorded Jon additional options. “I do worry they might assume I wish to steal his inheritance.”

Luca had said nothing at that, just picked up Jon’s sword, unsheathing it partially to inspect the edge.

“I sharpened it last night.”

“Good,” Luca had told him, face grim, before holding it out to him. “Danger is more likely to find us here than elsewhere on this voyage.”

None of his guards were particularly happy with the plan—or perhaps lack thereof—Jon had arranged. He’d thought of other ways to go about this, but none allotted for the initial secrecy and enabled them to keep the secret from those that might be watching if he were to meet elsewhere. Jon had even considered, briefly, waiting until the Shy Maid left port before riding Winter before
the ship to prove his heritage but had tossed that plan into the pile of manure it belonged.

Sometimes, as Maester Luwin had told him during lessons growing up, simple is better.

“I still don’t like this,” Gomer grumbled as they made their way through the crowd in the market, heading towards the river side of the port. He was the only one still voicing his issues with the plan.

“It will be fine.” Jon glanced aside at the man. Gomer glanced back at him before returning his gaze to the crowd around them. “Ser Gerik’s contacts were unable to find anything amiss. The ship is moored and only the crew has come and gone from it in the past three days.”

“Aye,” Gomer responded quickly, “but what if that crew isn’t what that letter touted it to be?”

Jon turned his attention ahead of himself, focusing on the short distance that now existed between him and his brother. He couldn’t think of what might happen if the boy he saw wasn’t Aegon.

“Then we’ll educate whomever we meet on the full meaning of my House’s words.”

Both of them.

The halls of Dragonstone were fairly empty of any décor; the Targaryen royals had bigger things to worry about, Jon supposed, and anything remotely related to House Baratheon likely had been burned or melted down upon their arrival. There were very few servants, those present appeared to all be soldiers of one type or another—sellsword, Dothraki, or Unsullied. Their eyes followed him—or more often Ghost—as he walked with Tyrion towards where he knew the castle’s great hall was located.

“I don’t suppose I could convince you to have Ghost wait outside?” Tyrion asked, glancing at the direwolf.

Ghost stared back at him as he plodded silently at their side.

Jon glanced at the Hand until Tyrion looked up at him.

Tyrion sighed. “I thought not.”

“Do your Queen and King leave their dragons outside during all their meetings?” Jon asked.

“Only when they don’t fit,” Tyrion said wryly. “I must warn you—”

“He won’t attack without cause.”

“Good. Neither will the dragons.”

Jon raised an eyebrow. He remembered Drogon. He knew the trouble Daenerys had controlling her children. Could one more Targaryen present in their lives make that much of a difference . . . especially when Jon’s presence had done little more than slightly calm Rhaegal? Neither Viserion or Rhaegal had ever been half the trouble Drogon was.

The doors to the great hall loomed before them. Two guards stood on either side of the shut door; a Dothraki on the right and a soldier of the Golden Company of the left.
They stopped several paces away.

“Do you wish me to introduce you?” Tyrion asked.

“That would be fine.”

The dwarf quirked a grin and raised an eyebrow. “And list your titles?” he slid a glance towards the young guard standing a few paced behind Ser Davos who had followed them quietly.

“As disappointed as my men may be,” Jon pressed his lips together, suppressing the chuckle that fought to spill out, “I’d prefer to keep it simple.”

“As you wish.” Tyrion inclined his head and then motioned for the doors to open, striding forward once there was just enough room for his shoulders to fit through.

As promised, Tyrion kept the announcement of his titles and the overall introduction simple. Jon followed him in at a normal pace, doing his best to give off an aura of confidence. He was a King. Whatever else he was—bastard of House Stark or House Targaryen—he was a King here and now.

Perhaps, had he not visited Dragonstone multiple times before, his jaw may have dropped in awe. Like much of this castle, the Targeryens had built it with their dragons in mind. Large wooden shutters, doors, had been opened to bare long balconies big enough for a dragon to land on stood on either side. The room had been cleaned up and here, finally, there were tapestries hanging, depicting scenes from House Targaryen’s history. He knew that some had been saved by bannermen loyal to the Targaryens and gifted to the new rulers—others had been hidden in the depths of the castle by servants only to be recovered later.

Jon had seen all of them before and none drew his eye away from his focus. He stared straight ahead, at the figures seated on twin thrones on the dais at the end of the hall, as he strode in, Ghost at his side. To either side of the thrones, half inside the room and half on the nearby balcony, two dragons lay—Rhaegal and Viserion. The dragon he’d oft bonded with was next to the King, Viserion was curled up near his mother.

Viserion’s eyes were shut when he first walked in. He’d always been the calmest of Daenerys’ dragons when unbonded. It was why, in previous lives, Jon always chose Rhaegal. By the time Viserion chose a rider—sometimes a Baratheon bastard like Gendry or, more often, Tyrion—the war for Dawn was always growing heated.

The golden dragon lifted its head when he and Ghost were halfway across the hall, focusing slit eyes on Jon curiously. For his part, Jon couldn’t help but reach out towards the dragon mentally. Viserion tilted his head, shifting to get a better look at him.

Jon forced himself to turn his attention away, refocusing it on the King and Queen. Daenerys was just as beautiful as she always was. Beautiful, confident, regal. She lifted her chin as he approached, violet eyes staring at him. He could see the curiosity she likely wished to hide as her eyes slid quickly between him, Ghost, and then back. She wore the Targaryen colors proudly, red beads glistened in her hair where they had been woven into her braids.

King Aegon . . . the sight of him was shocking. Jon hadn’t lacked for family in any life—at least not at the beginning—and he shared common traits with all his cousins. He even shared traits with Daenerys, their lips and the shape of their brow—though hers had a bit more femininity to them—and a slighter build. His coloring, he knew, came from the Starks. He’d never been able to pick out bits of his father in anyone to the extent that he could in the man seated on the throne before him.
He was surprised to note that they shared the same build, though the man looked to be a few inches taller. Like with Daenerys, he could see the similarities in their brow and lips. They shared the same point of the chin and perhaps jawline as well—though Jon’s was placed on the long Stark face.

They exchanged brief pleasantries, mostly amounting to a round of ‘your graces’.

It was Aegon who spoke first, when it became clear that Jon was not going to kneel before them. Daenerys just continued to stare darkly at him. Jon looked at her, silently.

“Congratulations on reclaiming your ancestral lands for your House,” he said, sitting straight on the stone throne. There was an emotion beneath it that told Jon the young man truly felt for him. He understood all too well what losing your home was like and how important it was to have reclaimed it. “I must say your arrival is surprising. We have heard little from the North since we arrived . . . we were under the impression that House Bolton ruled still.”

“They did,” Jon said as Ghost sat beside him, “until four moons ago.”

“When you retook your home,” Aegon’s voice was smooth, cultured, and the tone spoke of someone who had been taught to be a King. His whole demeanor oozed a confidence in his station that Jon only wished he could emulate.

“Aye,” Jon nodded, “The northern lords and ladies rallied behind Sansa Stark, and myself, to defeat House Bolton and reclaim Winterfell.”

“Lady Sansa . . .” Daenerys pursed her lips. “Your trueborn sister?”

“She is the trueborn daughter of Lord Eddard Stark.” He inclined his head in acknowledgment. Ghost shifted beside him, fur brushing against Jon’s leg.

“And yet you, a bastard, stand before us crowned King of the North.” Daenerys’ voice was a low rumble, quiet but commanding attention. There wasn’t much emotion in the phrase, but he could read the meaning sure enough. Her eyes were piercing, bright violet, brighter than Aegon’s; a slender eyebrow arched as she pursed her lips.

Jon turned his gaze towards her, meeting violet with cool grey. “Sansa preferred I take the throne as King when our bannermen knelt, but she rules Winterfell as much as I do.” He paused, glancing towards the King. “Lord Bran Stark also chose to waive his claim . . . for various reasons, both to the Crown of Winter and as Lord of Winterfell. Our bannermen crowned me and proclaimed independence from the Iron throne, just as they had for King Robb after Lord Eddard was beheaded by the late King Joffrey Waters.”

“Your brother is alive?”

Jon glanced aside at the man standing near Missendei. Varys, the Spider, Master of Whispers. A puppet master if there ever was one . . . but one that had, in general, always seemed to believe his actions were for the good of the realm. No matter the truth of things. He was always the most important truth of the world.

He nodded sharply and then glanced back at King Aegon and Queen Daenerys.

“I know what you wish,” he started, “but I cannot in good conscious kneel and swear fealty to you. My bannermen crowned me and should I turn my back on their wishes they will revoke their support and crown another of House Stark. If I die here the line of succession is already sorted and protected as well.” Sansa in Winterfell could be moved to safety, Bran beyond the wall but his
location known by loyal men of the Watch, Rickon on Skagos perhaps alive . . . they’d also made allowances for more distant relatives in the will they’d written and safeguarded with several of the more loyal lords. “I can, however, offer an alliance.”

“An alliance?” King Aegon raised an eyebrow.

“You need men and support to route the Lannisters and their supporters from Kings Landing, the Riverlands, and the Westerland, do you not?”

Daenerys pursed her lips. She didn’t like admitting to needing help. He knew, however, that she and Aegon would need it. Already their alliance with Highgarden was in chaos, several Houses having raised arms against the remaining Tyrells. Rumor had had it Lady Olenna and Lord Garlan were dead and only Lord Willas remained, chained in the Red Keep.

“And you mean to help us,” Aegon eyed him, “why?” he asked after a long moment, curiosity coloring his words.

“You want to rule the South. The North wants the Lannisters . . . the Freys. Anyone who betrayed us dead.”

“And House Targaryen didn’t?” Daenerys asked sharply.

“King Aerys killed Lord Rickard Stark and my Uncle Brandon,” Jon acknowledged. “Prince Rhaegar and Lyanna Stark made a horrible choice that led to my Uncle, Brandon, making a horrible mistake and my Lord Grandfather reacting to it. It all led to murder, which led to war and the fall of House Targaryen. As I see it the perpetrators of those acts received their justice long ago. The North would rather a Targaryen sit on the Iron Throne than a cuckolding lioness who would seek to burn her own people with wildfire.”

“What would the North get out of such an alliance?” King Aegon asked quietly, watching Jon, brow slightly furrowed in thought.

“If the North falls the realm falls,” Jon glanced towards the sky. The sun was high yet. “My explanation would be better served after dark falls. Like your dragons,” he quirked a smile at Viserion who hadn’t stopped watching him. If anything, the golden dragon had inched a tad closer to him, “it is something one must see to truly believe.”

“Talk of alliance is all well and good,” Daenerys said, eyes following his gaze to Viserion. The edge of her lips tilted in a frown before she glanced back at Jon, “but how would you wish to seal it? House Targaryen has no members that could marry into House Stark.”

“Marriage isn’t the only way to seal alliances,” Jon started and then paused. “Though not a bad suggestion . . . my bannermen were quite vocal when they brought it up themselves.”

“They had to have known there was no one for you to wed,” Aegon glanced at Daenerys. “We were quite clear in the letters we sent that Daenerys and I married to solidify our claim.”

“Aye,” Jon agreed, “but they insisted that I solidify my claim on the North through marriage. Sansa Stark and I wed a fortnight before I set sail from White Harbor.”

Daenerys’ eyebrows shot up in surprise and Aegon frowned.

“You wed your sister?” Tyrion asked incredulously.

Jon glanced at him. “I wed my cousin after it was brought to our attention that I am not the son of
Lord Eddard Stark," he paused glancing back at Aegon. He met the man’s violet eyes, “but the son of Lyanna Stark . . . and Rhaegar Targaryen.”
Late Summer Part XII

Even without the knowledge imparted to him by Ser Gerik’s contacts, Jon could have picked out the Shy Maid from the dozens of docked riverboats on the pier the letter directed them to. Many drew the eye with colorful paint jobs, embroidered sails that depicted allegiances to merchants, cities, and even the occasional Sellsword Company. The Shy Maid, in contrast, was muddy-grey color with a paint job that was only slightly less chipped than the first time Jon had seen it in previous lives.

It was secured at the end of a dock on the river side of the port, pointed away in a manner that could allow for a quick escape should the need arise. Only a few boats were moored nearby, all single-masted pole boats. Most appeared docked long term, more pleasure boats than working vessels. They slipped a single silver coin to the dockhand that was on watch as the sky slowly darkened overhead, a young man who grinned a gap-toothed smile and bore the signs of hard labor. He’d ask no questions and alert none, unless fighting broke out, Jon was sure.

Only three people were on the deck of the Shy Maid when they reached it, a woman Jon recognized to be the captain’s wife, Ysilla, and two men. It was hard to make out their features from where the sun was setting behind them.

One man caught sight of them as they strode down the dock and stood, watching, until Jon stepped onto the gangplank. Luca followed at his shoulder a stride behind while Gomer and Kyne stopped at the base, still on the dock itself.

Jon stopped before he stepped foot onto the ship, eyes surveying the ship and faces of each of the crew. The man who had been watching strode forward, a hand on the hilt of the bastard sword at his hip. He was brawny, taller by half a head than Jon perhaps more, with a shaggy beard and orange hair that reminded him a bit of Sansa’s when she was a babe before it darkened.

Ser Rolly Duckfield was hardly a man Jon could forget, having trained with him, sparred with him, and once even served on Aegon’s Kingsguard side-by-side. Duck, he’d been called by those that knew him well—and sometimes by those that didn’t. Ysilla approached as well, from where she’d been standing at the brazier on the after deck, lips pressed together as she eyed him.

“My apologies, I began, finding his voice, “if I’m intruding, but I was told I could a man called Griff on this vessel.”

Ysilla didn’t say anything Jon could understand but muttered beneath her breath. For all her stature, Jon remembered greatly how she and her husband didn’t accept bullying on their ship.

Duck and she exchanged a glance and he nodded. Turning she moved towards the cabins.

“He’s here,” Duck confirmed gruffly, turning his attention back to Jon. “Who’s asking?”

“Jae,” Jon settled on after a moment, not wanting to introduce himself with either of his proper names. Not yet when tensions were running high. “Griff and I have a . . . mutual acquaintance who enjoys the twitters of little birds. He told me I could find Griff here.”

Duck’s eyes traveled over Jon’s shoulder. “And your shadow?”

Glancing over his shoulder, Jon met Luca’s gaze. “Luca, my swornsword.” He turned back to Duck. “My uncle insists I be tailed everywhere I go.”
“Your uncle not a trusting man, I take it?” Duck’s fingers were shifting on his sword’s hilt.

Jon shrugged. “Not in others.” He glanced around, taking in the half dozen little lanterns that had been lit about the ship, the smoke drifting from the brazier along with the scent of spices and fish. “His family has lost a lot. He’d do anything in his power to prevent more loss.”

Footsteps thudded across the deck after the creak of a cabin door. Jon glanced up and caught sight of the man he’d both come to see and often dreaded. Griff, Jon Connington, was not the most trusting of men. He had made it his goal in life to raise and guide his charge towards retaking the Iron Throne and he never took kindly to perceived threats—real or imagined.

As Griff approached his pale blue eyes narrowed at the sight of Jon. “My contact didn’t say he was sending Northerners to me,” he practically growled.

“Mine didn’t say much at all, my lord.” Jon lifted his chin, eying the other man. His hair was a dark, vibrant blue that told of a recent dye job. They had been expected, or at least Griff had been expecting someone. “I was told little but that I would find what I seek here.”

“And what proof do you carry that you’re who I was told to meet?”

Jon pulled the scrap of paper out, along with a thick scroll, and held it out.

Griff took it and eyed the writing on it. He scowled a bit as he had to take a few steps closer to a lantern due to the darkening sky. “That’s all?” he asked, glancing at Jon again. He opened the lantern’s latch and stuck the slip into it, catching it alight. “My contact said this meeting was of great importance. We’ve been here five days awaiting your arrival and this is it?”

“We were in Braavos when I was given that message, my lord,” Jon said. Luca shifted behind him. “I’ve been told the sea provides its own time table to travelers.”

Griff stared at him. He was hard to read in the dark; the shadows from the lantern light playing across his face made him seem angrier than he truly was. “You say that you were told you’d find what you seek here.”

“Aye,” Jon nodded, “that I was.” He held out the other scroll at arms-length.

“What is this?” Griff asked after taking it and stepping back to where he could read it.

“Letters that contain a better explanation than I could give voice to.”

Tilting the scroll, the light finally caught on the dark blue wax seal enabling the Stark House sigil to be seen. Griff’s head shot up and he stared over at him. “You’re a Stark man?”

“Perhaps you should read the letters, my lord,” Jon suggested, voice forceful yet placid. He ignored the way Duck shifted and his sword’s blade inched into view. “I can promise you, my men and I mean no ill will to you and yours.”

“Why should I trust the word of a man whose House betrayed their King?”

“I know my history very well, my lord. Have you forgotten what King Aerys did to Lord Rickard and his heir?”

Griff’s jaw clenched visibly, causing a play of shadows across the clean-shaven face. His hand clenched around the scroll.
“The letters you hold offer a better explanation than I could provide . . . especially when some information is best not discuss aloud beneath open skies where voices carry.” *Especially those that did not keep to whispers.*

“Griff?” Duck’s voice was taut as he glanced between them, awaiting any command.

After several long moments of staring at Jon, Griff broke the seal forcefully, tearing the edge of the rough parchment. There were multiple pages of letters included. The first was a letter from Jon. The second was a letter from Lord Eddard Stark to Aegon Targaryen VI—something Ser Gerik had provided him to Jon’s utter surprise—and the last two were noted and signed documents from the Iron Bank. A copy of the witness of Rhaegar and Lyanna’s marriage that had been sent along with the bride price and documentation setting up Jon’s account, and a letter from Jon to his brother advising of the existence of an account for his use at the Iron Bank.

As he finished the first letter, Griff’s eyes scanned back up again to reread it. At the end, he skimmed through the final line and then again, and again. He glanced up at Jon, face unreadable, before flipping through the other three letters. His eyes caught on the page Jon knew to denote the marriage.

“It’s not a lie,” Jon said gently.

The exiled Lord stared at him, hand lowering the letters slightly. “How can I know this is truth? Pretty words on paper, how can I trust them? They cannot prove who you are. You look a Stark—”

“Aye, I look a Stark,” Jon said, stepping forward. “My mother was a Stark,” he paused as Duck shifted, unsheathing his blade partially. Luca took a step closer to him and he heard the creak of the gangplank as well. “Stark blood runs through my veins.” His hand went to his sword belt and he unbuckled it quickly before letting it clatter to the ground.

Ignoring the possible threat to his side, Jon rolled up the sleeve of his right hand and stepped closer to Griff. “But a Stark is not all that I am,” he continued. Griff tensed as he stepped closer.

Eyeing Griff, Jon reached past him towards the lantern. He ignored the sound of blades unsheathing and pressed the lantern open and shoved his hand inside. The slip of paper Varys’ birds had sent him was but ashes now, but the candles flame was strong and vibrant, it tickled warmly against his palm and danced along his fingers.

He glanced back to see Luca’s eyes locked on Duck. Both men had their blades drawn. Duck, however, was watching him with a confused look of shock. Griff’s features were tense, blue eyes wide, his hand clenched tight around the letters, crinkling the pages.

They stood there, staring at each other, Jon watching as the man attempted to formulate the best course of action he could take. After a minute or two, he spoke again as his shoulder began to ache. “While I could do this all day, my shoulder is beginning to protest the position. If you want, we could move to the brazier. You could get a much better—”

“You don’t burn.”

Jon started enough to pull his hand from the lantern as he turned towards the voice.

It surprised him that he hadn’t heard anyone approach. That he had missed the thudding tap of leather-soled boots on the wooden planks of the deck. He rarely missed such a move, cataloging every possible threat from the shifting of Duck’s weight with the sway of the ship to the third crewman was still watching near the prow, having only stepped a few paces closer and drawn a
His eyes widened at the sight of the new, familiar face. The icy rolling feeling in Jon’s gut suddenly disappeared, replaced by a warm rush of relief. His doubts washed away.

“No,” Jon confirmed, a smile quirking the edges of his lips ever so slightly. “I don’t.”

Aegon stared at him, violet eyes glinting in the light from the lantern. He cocked his head, eyes drifting between the lantern, Jon, and the other men, before sliding back Jon’s face.

“Neither do I.”
Jon bit his lip as he stared at people milling about the small port. This was the fourth port he’d tried along the Rhoyne as he racked his brain trying to remember every story that his brother had told him over the last three lives they’d met. He’d give it one more port town after this before he’d turn back, either head to Westeros or perhaps Qarth where he knew Daenerys would eventually head with the remnants of her Khalasar. He’d already heard rumors of the death of Viserys. It wouldn’t much longer before she hatched her dragons.

Ghost whined next to him, pressing against his leg. He’d shorn his companion's thick fur twice now during their travels and it was starting to get too long, too thick, again. Tonight, he thought, I’ll trim his fur again once the sun has set. Ghost shuffled forward, eyes suddenly focused, jaw snapping shut. His paws made more noise than they should, covered by thick socks with leather stitched to the bottom. Jon had purchased the material and made the little boots himself after spending two weeks rubbing ointment on the bottom of the direwolf’s feet after they had been burned by the hot sand.

“What is it, boy?” Jon asked, trying to follow his gaze. His world shifted for a moment, causing him to sway, as he saw briefly from Ghost’s eyes.

His head snapped up and he quickly found what the direwolf showed him. A familiar face in the crowd. Haldon the half-maester was speaking with a merchant, purchasing goods.

Next to him was a familiar head of blue hair. Aegon was biting into a candied date, eyes glancing between Haldon and the merchant as they haggled.

Jon smiled down at Ghost, relief coursing through him. This hadn’t been a fruitless endeavor after all. Now, though, came the hard part.

He had to convince them he meant them no harm. Convince him that he was Aegon’s brother and that he had no interest in the older boy’s birthright. That he would stand by Aegon’s side as he took the Iron Throne and killed the Lannister’s for their crimes against House Targaryen and House Stark.

That the Iron Throne was nothing but a distraction and the true war lay to the North.

Ghost whined at him again and stepped forward. Jon swallowed thickly and followed him.

At nearly two years Jon’s senior, Aegon Targaryen was a man grown more clearly than he himself. His hair was dyed a dark blue the same shade as Griff’s, the color of it helping to disguise the bright violet of his eyes in the brighter light of the cabin they found themselves in. It was Haldon’s, Jon knew, and the largest of the cabins on the Shy Maid.

Books and jars of a variety of substances Jon thought he could identify, given enough time, covered every surface in the cabin. He remembered much from his time learning at the citadel and at the side of men and women throughout the lands, but much of the details came slowly to him now, refreshed when he encountered them. Haldon himself was eying him speculatively as the silence grew between the small group; no one wished to break it.
There were six of them in the cabin, Aegon, Griff, Haldon, Duck standing near the door, Jon himself, and Luca standing behind him. Kyne and Gomer were waiting outside, as there was not enough room for all of them, and they’d shared guest right shortly after Aegon appeared and demanded to know what was going on. They were lucky that Ysilla had bread to spare after an afternoon spent baking the evening’s meal and rolls to break the morning’s fast.

Upon settling into the cabin Aegon had taken the letters to read for himself, perusing them slowly as he read each line, word once and then again and then thrice. Occasionally he’d glance up to stare at Jon for a moment before dropping his eyes back to the letter.

“So,” Aegon said finally, “you’re my brother. Jaehaerys Targaryen.”

“Half-brother,” Griff bit out softly. “If that.” His eyes were slanted as he stared at Jon, gaze as cold as ice.

Choosing to ignore him, Aegon eyed Jon, his gaze sweeping over Jon’s face, searching for some familiarity. The features they shared were faint, but present, he knew. He hoped Aegon was observant enough to find them.

“Aye,” Jon murmured, sitting straighter. “That’s what I’ve been told and I cannot help but believe.” He smiled slightly, glancing down at his hands.

“My father abandoned my mother to run off with yours,” Aegon said, voice harsh as he handed the letters to Haldon to read. “They caused a war that lost my . . . our House the throne.”

“Aye,” Jon agreed. “They did.” He watched his brother for a moment, waiting, but the blue-haired youth said nothing. Squaring his shoulders, he continued, “They were young and made a brash, stupid decision. Those around them reaped the consequences. We are still dealing with them today.”

Aegon nodded after a moment, the slightest amount of tension seeping from his features. “In the letter, you swore an oath that you won’t challenge my claim to the throne.”

“I did,” he acknowledged. “I’ll swear it again before the Old Gods, the New . . . before Rhyllor, the Old Man of the River, the Faceless God, Balerion . . . any you wish.” He paused, setting his jaw, leaning forward slightly. “Though I must warn that I follow the Old Gods. Any oath I swear to them will bear a higher meaning.”

Aegon frowned, idly picking up a piece from the cymase board that sat to his right. “I would accept your oath . . .” he trailed off, staring down at the piece for a moment. It was a pale dragon, “. . . but why?”

“Why?”

“Why would you swear such a thing to me?” he asked, glancing aside to Griff who was still tense, eyes blazing as he watched Jon. He shifted, leaning back in his chair, fingers tightening around the dragon piece. “The realm believes me dead. You could rally the North and dozens of other lords behind the Targaryen name.” He lifted his gaze to meet Jon’s again. “You could take the throne for yourself.”

“I don’t want it,” Jon said immediately, shrugging.

“You don’t want it?” Griff asked, practically scoffing the words.

“Why not?” Aegon tilted his head, strands of vibrant blue slipped across his forehead. He brushed
them away.

“Lots of reasons,” Jon shot a look at Griff. “I was raised a bastard, no matter the truth of my birth. All my life I expected to either stand in my brother Robb’s shadow or join the Nights Watch once my lord father’s wife declared I could no longer live in Winterfell. The only thing I wanted was to one day hear that my father asked the King to give me his name.” He sighed and turned back to his brother. “And then I found out the truth. I have a name. Jaehaerys Targaryen. Then my uncle gave me his, adopting me into his House formally as Jon Stark—” Griff flinched, sitting straighter. “—now I two names. Two families, though I didn’t dare hope I’d ever meet my father’s family.” He shook his head. “Politics and the niceties of court have never interested me. I can deal with them, but I wasn’t born for it. Not in the way you,” he met Aegon’s gaze, “or my brother. . . cousin Robb were. I want a family, that’s all I’ve ever wanted. Someplace to belong.”

Truth colored his words and Jon had done nothing to mask the emotions he felt regarding them. In many ways, he had what he’d dreamed of—what he’d always wanted. In this life, unlike so many others, he’d gained it all so soon; quicker than ever before and somehow without the bloodshed that usually darkened the accomplishment. He didn't need a throne in this life. Jon had sat upon the Northern Throne and the Iron Throne oft enough. He didn't relish the bureaucracy that came with ruling. He preferred the lives he stood beside Aegon as his Hand, beside Robb as his General. He could handle being heir presumptive if it came to that.

“You must understand our hesitation,” Haldon spoke, glancing up at Jon over the letter he read. “You are a stranger whether you are young Griff’s brother . . . or not. That you’ve found us means his secret has been released.”

“I and my men mean him no harm,” Jon attempted to assure him. “The Spider sent me . . . if he had not I would have only known that Aegon was alive, nothing more.”

“And it was the Iron Bank that told you of his existence.” Gryph’s words stunk of incredulity, sharply spat into the small room.

“They did, as clearly as the Iron Bank would provide any information.” Jon glanced at Griff, grey eyes glinting silver in the lamplight as they narrowed. “I gathered they were growing more and more annoyed at the accounts access being cut off. Legally speaking. It has been fifteen years, after all. The Iron Bank is nothing if not opportunistic.”

“And you were their opportunity.”

Jon suppressed a growl and leaned back, chin lifting slightly. “I was there,” he stated simply.

The conversation devolved a bit then, between Haldon and Griff arguing over the necessity of secrecy, of what Jon’s arrival could lead to, and of what danger Jon posed to them—to Aegon.

Jon sighed as he listened, glancing down at his hands where they were clenched into the fabric bunched at his knees. His fingers were quaking, ever so slightly. The nerves back again, this time worried over whether his brother would accept his existence or if he’d turn away. That had so seldom happened, but each time, just as the times where their encounter ended up with a knife in his back or throat—usually courtesy of Jon Connington—stung deep.

Aegon stood sharply, interrupting the debate beginning to heat up. His eyes still locked on Jon’s face. “I wish to speak with my brother.”

Jon blinked at the words, mouth dry, as he watched his brother face down the man he’d long saw as his father.
“Aeg—” Griff started, standing as well.

“Alone,” Aegon’s eyes danced between his traveling companions, “or near enough.” He turned back to Jon, expression tight. “If we speak on deck will your men stand back far enough to allow us privacy?”

“Aye.” Jon nodded, standing. “They will.”

“Good.” The older youth turned, striding to the door. He paused, hand poised to open it and met Jon’s eyes. “Shall we?”

His brother had half a head on him; he stood at least as tall as Duck and the still lanky form told of possible growth to come in the next few years. Jon knew he’d always be shorter than Aegon, for all that he would catch up a few more inches himself before he finished growing. His stride was long and confident as he led the way to the prow of the ship. He passed Gomer and Kyne without a glance and Jon motioned the two men to stay back. Duck and Luca trailed behind them, remaining a good twenty feet away. Griff watched wearily from the afterdeck near the brazier.

Aegon leaned against the rail of the ship and stared up at the stars. Coming to a stop a pace away, Jon settled a hand on the rail and watched the older boy.

“I had a sister once,” Aegon said finally, voice soft. It was almost hard to hear over the lapping of the waves against the hull. “Griff tells me she had curly brown hair and skin shades darker than mine. He can’t remember if her eyes were like our father’s or mother’s.” He sighed, fingers clenching around the wooden rail. “I don’t remember her or my mother . . . or father.” He glanced at Jon. “You didn’t know yours either.”

“No, I didn’t.” Jon shook his head. Sometimes he wished that he could go back further, see his father and save him on the Trident or even view his mother’s face from the eyes of his infant self. He wished he knew the sound of his father’s voice tangled with the tune of harp as he entertained crowds. “But, I grew up thinking my uncle was my father and my cousins my half-siblings.”

“You grew up with a family.” The words had an edge of bitter sadness to them.

Staring at his brother, Jon inclined his head because he had. Robb had and always would be his brother. Arya was his sister no matter and Bran, Rickon, and Sansa would always be his siblings as well. No matter how close he and Sansa ended up in some lives. He might not be as close to them as Robb or Arya, but he still loved them all dearly. In this life, he was even closer to them than ever before. “I did.”

“I thought Griff was truly my father,” Aegon admitted, “for years. When he finally told me . . .” he glanced back at Jon, smiling sadly. “I was devastated to learn the truth. I tried to deny it, convince him to tell me he was lying . . . but he only said he could no longer dishonor my father by hiding the truth from me.”

“I was, too.” He had been, that first time, when Bran had told him in the Godswood what he’d seen . . . Jon hadn’t believed it. It had been Sansa that had written to Lord Reed requiring his presence. After the lord confirmed it . . . Jon had torn father’s solar—what remained of it after fire and the occupation of the Bolton’s—apart and then gone to the crypts to rage where no one would see their King fall apart. “But just because he didn’t sire me doesn’t mean Lord Eddard isn’t my father. He
raised me and I still see him as such. Like you see Griff.”

It had shredded what little confidence in his right to hold his station remained, no matter what Bran and Sansa said. The fact that he wasn’t Ned Stark’s son . . . during his third life, he screamed the truth of things at the man in the middle of the Great Hall. He had raged and cried and then ran to the Wall. It was the first life he’d been assassinated. A dagger to the heart by a Baratheon man sent to the Wall by order of his King.

Aegon glanced away, staring up at the stars. “He hates it when I call him father. I see it in his eyes.”

“I doubt that,” Jon said. “I saw how he looks at you and how outraged he is about me. He cares deeply for you . . . he probably just feels guilty for claiming you. For raising you when . . . when Rhaegar will never see you as a man grown.”

His brother’s lips quirked up slightly and he shifted, crossing his arms to rest his elbows on the rail, forearms running the length. “We haven’t had a scare like this before,” he admitted. “You’ve made him nervous, striding in unexpectedly with words on your lips, knowledge few have, and promises that seem too sweet to be reality.”

“I only promise what I can keep,” Jon insisted with a sigh.

“Neutrality at worst if my campaign begins after the death of the usurper.” His eyes were dark and narrowed when he looked at Jon. “He killed our father.”

“Aye,” Jon acknowledged, “but my uncle has made oaths and will not turn against the man that helped the North avenge their Lord and Lord’s heir. Lyanna was not the sole or even main reason the North rose against our mutual grandfather. My uncle will not rise against the man he helped place on the throne unless he threatens his family or the North. I will not go to war against House Stark.”

Aegon sighed and ran a hand through his hair, tousling it. There was a slight wave to the strands, but nothing close to the thick curls crowning Jon’s head.

“I won’t fight a war against House Targaryen either,” Jon said after a minute or two of silence of watching the waves lap against the ship’s hull. *Though I may make an exception for Viserys.* “Family is precious to me. I’d rather not lose anyone . . . Stark or Targaryen.”

“I don’t know what it’s like to have a brother.” Aegon was watching him when he finally looked up.

“Well,” Jon started, smile slipping across his lips, “I don’t have too much experience being a bratty younger brother.” Robb and he were too close for that and Lady Catelyn wouldn’t have liked such behavior, “but I can promise you that I won’t steal your birthright.”

Aegon chuckled then. “What makes you think you could?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. “It’s not a threat,” he said after waiting for a response from Jon for nearly a minute. The smile had dropped from his face. “I just—”

Jon chewed his lip and then glanced at the sky. He reached out mentally and then, as Aegon began to speak, darted his gaze to a particular spot on the horizon. Shifting closer to Aegon, he pointed, interrupting him. “Watch there.”

“—meant—What?”
“Please,” Jon said, glancing up at him.

Aegon pressed his lips together and then shifted, tilting his head to follow the line Jon’s finger made. It was barely half a minute before a line of flames appeared, drifting in brilliant hues across the dark sky, lighting it before a white shaped slipped through them, breaking the line of flames and helping it to peter out in the air with great sweeps of white-blue wings.

His brother gasped and drew back, glancing at him with wide eyes.

Jon quirked a grin. “Her name is Winter.”

Aegon turned back, eyes darting over the night sky. It was too dark and the moon too empty for light to reflect off her scales. After several minutes, he turned back to Jon.

“In your uncle’s letter, he stated the North would not support me against Robert Baratheon.” His eyes narrowed. “Why did he not include Robert’s children as well?”

Jon set his jaw, staring seriously at his brother. “Perhaps, if King Robert had any trueborn children he might have.” He continued on, ignoring the confusion tainting Aegon’s features, “As it were, Lord Stark, and the North, will not support the Lannister’s cuckolding the throne. Prince Joffrey and his siblings are lions through and through. Children born of incest between Cersei Lannister and her brother, Jaime.”

“How do you know this?” Aegon asked, voice rough.

“I know a lot of things, Aeg,” Jon murmured. He still wasn’t sure if this was a route he could take. He’d often claimed to have the sight, to have dreams like Daenys, but this . . . perhaps it wasn’t the smartest move but in his gut, something told him it was the right one. Aegon himself had never turned on Jon if their initial meeting went well—and had never sought to kill him even if it didn’t —and there was so much good his brother could do . . . with the right knowledge. Nodding slightly to himself, Jon pressed his lips together and turned to face Aegon fully. “I would tell you . . . if you would hear.”

Aegon stared at him, eyes darting over his features. His brother took in a shaky breath. “I would.”
Late Summer Part XIV

They returned to the Golden Trident, stalking through the streets of Volantis long past midnight. It was a short night for all of them, especially for Jon. He was restless throughout, tossing and turning in his bed, furs pushed to the floor and later claimed by Ghost as the direwolf peered at him in the dark.

Shortly after sunrise he rose, scrubbing roughly at his face with fingers, feeling the crust of sleep under his eyelashes telling of some of the darker moments he’d faced in the short hours of the night. The deep cut of knives, fire burning deep into his bones, the dark looks in the eyes of those he trusted as they betrayed him time and again . . . sometimes he just couldn't chase the memories, dreams, away.

Haig was already up and slipped inside the cabin, shortly after Jon opened the door to peer out at the crew, with a pail of warm water ready.

Jon scrubbed himself quickly, washing away sweat, and holding the rag over his eyes for several minutes once he reached his face. The heat didn’t wake him as easily as the cold did, but it did help ease the tension behind his eyes.

He glanced over at Ghost who lapped at a fresh bowl of water he’d been brought, tongue curling in the liquid. It didn’t take long for him to go through the entire bowl.

“Haig,” Jon called before the man could scamper off to locate breakfast.

“Yes, my lord?” Haig asked, turning to face him.

“Could you fill the extra water skeins? I would rather not be caught in the heat without enough water should something go wrong.”

Haig bit his lip, worry coloring his features, but nodded swiftly. “Of course, my lord. I’ll make sure they are ready before you leave.”

Volantis rose early, just like every other port city Jon knew. It also stayed up late. The whore houses had still been bustling and drunks staggering in the streets when he’d made his way back to the ship last night, his guards at his sides and back, hands on the hilts of their swords.

As they made their way to the edge of the town a voice echoed down the street towards them, words rounded with an accent that spoke of a person well versed with travel. His knowledge of the Volantene dialect was half as good as he’d like it to be and the person that spoke was doing so quickly. It took a minute for the words to register as he parsed the meanings.

Gritting his teeth, he caught sight of a red robe, standing amidst a small crowd in the distance. A chill ran down his spine as the speaker gestured widely, head turning in his direction. Swiftly, Jon quickened his stride doing his best to get out of sight as quickly as possible.

“My lord?” Kyne asked, moving to keep pace with him, eyes darting back the way they’d come.

“A red priest’s words can be sweet,” Jon murmured, a reminder to himself perhaps, “but their flames burn swift and without prejudice. Their God gifts them knowledge, but few can discern truth within the flames.”

Kyne furrowed his brow and exchanged a glance with Luca.
Jon turned his attention back ahead as they headed to the edge of town, following the rare demarcations left to assist travelers.

Jon gasped, eyes shooting open, his chest heaved as he choked on air. "No," he coughed out, voice desperate, "no, no, no . . ."

A hand settled, warm and wrong on his shoulder. A face, familiar and oh so wrong, leaned over him with dark brown eyes that glinted red and curly blood-red hair leaned over him. "Your grace," the priestess murmured as she peered at him.

He struck out, body shaken and weak but his rage beating out his self-control in that weak moment before his connection with Ghost shifted back into place and he found himself fully in control of his actions.

The priestess drew back, stepping away, staggering, hand cupping over her cheek.

He couldn't help but feel some satisfaction at the sight of the bright red blood dripping from her nose. The pain in his knuckles soothing, grounding in a way he loathed.

"No," he murmured again, anger and desperation dripping from his words as he rolled away. He caught sight of the body, feet away, and anger shifted through him again. This world was doomed. Tyrion, Daenerys . . . both dead years past and now Aegon . . . "I shouldn't be here."

"But you are," her sickly sweet voice crawled over his skin, the allure of seduction rolling over him and dissipating without effect. He knew her tricks well. "The Lord isn't done with you yet."

But he was done with her.

As soon as he had full control over his faculties again . . . he was done with all of them.

The sun had peaked several hours prior when they met Aegon, Griff, Duck, Haldon, and Septa Lemore at the edge of the city. They had all secured their own mounts from locals, rugged horses bred for the warmer conditions of the region over the centuries; the type usually coveted by the Dothraki.

They had agreed on this meeting at Aegon’s insistence after parting ways for a very short, rather restless night. This morning had been the first time Jon had met the Septa in this life; he wasn’t sure where she was last night, but he wasn’t going to ask.

She was watching him with an odd expression, long dark hair done up and hidden under a wispy veil, almost wistful sometimes and yet at others her eyes narrowed darkly. He knew she had her reasons, but he wasn’t about to bring up the pains of the past without cause with her. It would do nothing but cause pain for her and, perhaps, eventually his family. The septa could keep her silence, her secrets, until she was ready to speak of them.

“How far will we be going?” Aegon asked him as Jon tested the tack on his horse and adjusted the stirrups.
Jon glanced up at his brother. The young man was staring out into the hills, eyes roving over the countryside. “Perhaps an hour’s ride,” he answered. “She found a good spot last night . . . far from good herding grounds and any settlements.”

“She’s cautious then.”

“Aye,” Jon nodded. “so am I.”

Aegon raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t seem quite so last night.”

Wincing, Jon shrugged. “I guess . . . I did act rashly. More so than I should have. But . . .” he pursed his lips, a serious expression filtering over his features, “I had to know.”

“I’m not sure if I can believe all you say,” Aegon admitted as they watched his father figure mount up some ways away. Griff, or Jon Connington, was still reticent about Jon and his guards’ presence amongst them. He had also argued harshly against the ride they were taking today. It was understandable, they had only just met and no words or documents he could present would make the man trust him. The last nearly fifteen years of Griff’s life had been spent protecting Aegon from the world and any threats. The man could only see Jon as a such.

“If I was you, I’m not sure I would either,” Jon conceded with a sigh.

“I’m glad you told me,” Aegon said softly, glancing aside at their guards. “If only so that past mistakes may not be repeated. I would rather tread carefully and with measured action and meet a wary citizenship than trod swiftly through ash and blood to be met with little but tortured relief. Standing upon a burnt and melted out throne before a sea of corpses is not what I desire.”

“But you want to be King.”

“I do,” his brother confirmed, chin lifting as a smile wound its way on his lips. “But I don’t want to be our grandfather. I don’t want to have to watch my back for the rest of my life.”

“You may have chosen the wrong path,” Jon told him, with only a slight hint of humor. “You’ll have to be careful about who you let stand beside you.”

Aegon inclined his head and shrugged, raising an eyebrow. “Does that include you?”

“I have no desire to spend my days amongst the pit of liars in Kings Landing,” Jon shook his head. “The Stark blood runs thick in my veins. The North is my home.”

“I will just have to weed out the corruption,” Aegon said, seriously. “Perhaps you could help? If you’re willing to tear yourself away from the frosty North to visit.”

Jon opened his mouth to answer because he would. He had, a few times, been Aegon’s hand . . . when they survived that long. Living past the final conflict with the Nights King was a rarity, but not impossible. Picking up the pieces after the fact had oft proved just as, if not more so, treacherous than actual war.

A startled gasp and a nervous whinny had them turning. Ghost loped up, red eyes glittering in the light and Jon sighed. Stepping away from his horse—it was still tied to a post—he moved towards his companion. He’d been too caught up in his own mind to notice Ghost’s nearing presence.

“What are you doing, boy,” he asked, kneeling. “You were to stay on the boat.”

Ghost gave him a flat eyed look, ears twitching back in annoyance as he bumped his head roughly
against Jon’s chest, sending him sprawling. The direwolf glanced about the group, red eyes finding Aegon before trotting forward a few steps and sitting before the man.

Aegon was staring apprehensively, form tense as watched the wolf plant himself several feet away, tail sweeping particles of dust and dirt and bits of dried weeds across the ground.

Jon sighed and stood, brushing the dust off his clothes. “He won’t hurt you,” he promised, moving back towards his brother and their horses. Both horses were shying away as best they could, ears flicked back as they tried to glance towards the direwolf which was just out of their line of sight.

“How’d he even get out here?” Gomer asked incredulously from nearby.

Ghost glanced his way and then back at Jon.

“What the fuck is that thing?” Duck asked having moved closer to his charge at the sight of the massive wolf.

“He’s a direwolf,” Jon said with a sigh, “and my companion . . . he’s not a pet, but he’s tame enough. He won’t hurt anyone that isn’t threatening me or mine.”

Aegon glanced at him, a question in his gaze.

Jon nodded, just a slight dip on his chin. It amazed him how quickly his brother seemed to accept him, read him, though perhaps some of the words they’d shared last night had to do with it. Over the lives Jon had spent in his company, he’d learned a lot about Aegon. Stories, dreams . . . many things that Aegon shared with no one before him.

He was sure that his brother didn’t trust him, not fully, not yet, but Aegon was giving Jon leave to convince him. That was certainly more than he could have hoped for.

Stepping slowly forward, Aegon held out a hand, palm up, towards Ghost, stopping just a few feet away. The direwolf shifted, stood, and stepped forward, sniffing the outstretched hand and then nuzzling it, licking it gently. Turning his hand over, Aegon let Ghost rub his muzzle and head under it, bumping it gently until it settled between his ears.

“He’s gorgeous,” Aegon murmured, a smile tilting his lips. The image brought back other memories of similar situations in a dozen other lives. “And huge.”

Jon smiled. “Aye,” he agreed with a chuckle, “that he is. Just wait until you meet Winter though.”

Aegon looked up at him, eyes bright. “I can’t wait.”

“Then we should get going,” Griff called over to them, already astride his horse, staring off towards the hills. “We’re wasting time.”

“Fucking huge wolf,” Duck muttered as they all began to mount.

Luca laughed, adjusting his reins. “You should see his mother. He’s not even full grown.”

Haldon whistled, eyeing Ghosts form as the direwolf trotted past them to scent a nearby tree as those giving him attention were mounting their own horses.

“He was the runt of the litter, too,” Gomer said with a grin, “according to the kennel master who looked in on them and the mother.”

“How much bigger is he going to get?” Duck asked, eyeing Ghost speculatively.
Jon rolled his eyes as he spurred his horse forward, catching up to where Griff and several of the others were already waiting. It was always the same questions, the same shock and awe when it came to Ghost’s presence. With Winter, at least, he hadn’t heard the same thoughts a hundred thousand times.

“So,” Aegon called, bringing his own mount alongside Jon’s, “which way should we head?”

Slipping his eyes shut, he reached out, nudging past Ghost’s still annoyed presence, he sought Winter’s patient beacon in the distance. He could practically feel her purr with excitement.

He glanced to the north-east and nodded. “That way.”
The sun was getting high in the sky, beating down on the, and Jon was reminded of how much he disliked the heat of Essos. His clothes were sticking to his skin, hair nearly touching his shoulders as it laid flatter than usual. He squinted, glancing about as they rode, Aegon's horse trod beside his, carefully finding its footing in the rough terrain.

His brother was fidgeting, hands tense about the reins as he directed his horse. In the bright light, he could see the glints of violet that the dark blue dye hid. Aegon looked so young, though he was two years Jon's senior, still so young for the weight of leadership, the weight of a family dynasty bearing down on him. Jon hated to leave it to him, in some ways, but he knew that Aegon could bear kingship far better than he could—not after so many lives of donning one crown or another.

He felt a rush of excitement pass through him and smiled, casting a look off to the hills to the west and settling back into his saddle. Ghost was scouting the surrounding area, enjoying being able to roam freely on dry land. Jon tasted a hint of iron, felt flesh and blood between his teeth. Jon had caught a flash of the hare his companion had sighted and rushed down. The creature had never seen a direwolf before. Even white as snow, the hare hadn't expected the attack.

Aegon was watching him when he came back to himself, one silver-gold eyebrow arched.

"Was that . . . warging?" Aegon asked, lowering his voice so as not to gain much attention from those about them.

"Aye," Jon nodded tightly, maintaining his smile. "It was. Sorry. Ghost sometimes . . . catches me off guard."

"You cannot always control it?"

"Most of the time I can. Just—At times the pull is much too great to ignore."

Aegon nodded. "Is it like that with Winter as well?"

"Not so much," Jon told him, brow knitting together. "With her it is different. I can still warg with her, yes, but the process . . . it doesn't feel the same."

"Targaryen versus Stark," Aegon mused glancing aside as they both caught sight of Ghost trotting towards them, a dust-brown hair the size of his head dangling from his jowls.

Jon laughed and shook his head. "Fire and ice." Fire and Ice. Rhaegar and Lyanna. Old Valyria and the First Men . . . the Children.

Aegon 'hmmed and followed Ghost as he plodded towards them. The direwolf didn't come too close, knowing that the horses were still shy of his presence.

Eventually, they found their way to the place Winter had shown him, a valley nestled between barren hillsides with a small oasis where a small, mostly dry, tributary of the Rhoyne sidled through. There was a grove of trees near the rocky creek bed to which they tied their horses. Gomer stayed with them; he was the best at handling horses and keeping them calm. The rest of them walked slowly, out into the center of the valley, each watching the sky and hills with curious trepidation.
“Well then,” Griff said, casting a glance around. He stood some ways away from Jon, angled so he could watch Jon and his guards with a close eye. His hand stayed close to the sword at his hip, “where is this dragon of yours?”

Jon couldn’t hold the man’s disbelief against him . . . in this life Daenerys had yet to hatch her dragons. His aunt was with Khal Drogo now, he knew, and perhaps her dragons would hatch within the next year, but this world hadn’t seen dragon’s in a hundred and fifty years. Not until Winter. They lived in the realm of myths now. Many smallfolk and even a few maester’s Jon had met over his many lives held deep doubt in the fact that they had ever existed. No matter that the bones of dragons still existed, many held in the depths of the Red Keep. Some had started placing them into the realm of myths alongside the Children, White Walkers, Giants . . . and half a dozen other beings Jon knew from experience certainly existed.

Aegon came to stand next to him, watching him rather than the skies.

“She’s coming,” Jon assured, staring straight to where he could feel her presence tugging at him to the north.

And come she did.

Winter swept over the tallest hill, gliding low above the ground, and swung around, circling them as she climbed higher with gentle sweeps of her wings. She twisted and turned, climbing higher before turning back into a slow dive. Sunlight glinted off her bright white scales, the blue highlights sparkled as her leathery wings beat up dust in the air off the side of the hills, casting small puffs of dirt into the air.

She was showing off, Jon knew, and he smiled with amusement as they watched her. Behind him and to his side he heard curses, muttering to various Gods.

With a roar, she blew a breath of flames out into the air, well above the ground, and twisted to fly in a corkscrew around it before halving the flames swiftly with a sweep of her tail. She turned then, flipping over in the air before moving toward them. At the last moment, she pulled back, hovering for a split second, and then landed in front of Jon and Aegon, kicking up swirls of dust. The currents ruffled their hair and blew back the hood Septa Lemore had donned to cover her brown curls and shade her face.

Winter dropped her head, blinking her eyes as her muzzle was a foot or less from Jon’s face. He reached out and caressed it, running his hand over the ridges and bumps of her scales over her eyes.

“Gods . . .” Aegon murmured in awe at his side. The exclamation caught her attention and she swept her gaze towards him, blinking, nostrils flaring as she pressed closer towards the other Targaryen.

“She won’t hurt you,” Jon told him softly.

Aegon darted a glance at him and then turned back to Winter. He swallowed thickly and then held out his hand slowly, much in the same way he greeted Ghost earlier.

Just like Ghost she bumped her muzzle gently against his hand and let out a purring-chuff noise. She pushed her muzzle into his hand and then tilted her head to the side so she could eye him with one, slit eye.

Letting out a light laugh, Aegon ran his fingers over her features, drifting them from her muzzle to slide over the ridge above her eye, a smile growing on the lips. “I never thought I would see a
dragon,” he said breathlessly. "She's beautiful."

Jon smiled, settling a hand on the side of her neck, relishing the feeling of the smooth, warm scales, even considering the heat of the air around him.

"I scarce believed it was true," Lemore murmured a little ways away from where she stood next to Griff. Jon glanced at them, taking in the wide eyes and clenched jaw of the exiled lord.

“How did you find her?” Aegon asked as he ran his fingers over her neck, standing on the side opposite Jon, meeting his gaze over the spines growing out of Winter's back.

“There was an egg,” Jon admitted softly, “in the items my . . . our father left with my mother at the Tower of Joy. Apparently, the wet nurse that had been hired was told to place it in my cradle upon my birth. She insisted my uncle take it with him.”

"Gods," Aegon stared at his own hand where it touched Winter's scales and Jon could practically feel the jealousy tinging his words, "where did he get it?” His brow furrowed as he leaned against Winter. She shifted, wings lifting to shade them. "To think it—she—was just waiting for years . . . do you think there are others?"

"They both thought her egg nothing but a stone,” Jon said, smiling sadly. He wasn't sure if he should share his theory, that Aegon and perhaps even Rhaenys had been gifted eggs the day they were born as well.

“A stone?”

Jon glanced over at Septa Lemore who was staring not at the dragon, but at him. He nodded. “Yes, a stone. To anyone but someone with Targaryen blood, or the blood of old Valyria perhaps, they feel cold as stone and seem as if they are naught but a fossil or a carved, brightly colored rock.”

Her violet eyes stood out more than normal in the bright sunshine as she stared at him, lips pressing tightly together. “And this stone . . . hatched?” she asked, voice quivering on the last word.

“Eventually,” Jon furrowed his brow, watching her, “after some time spent incubating within a fire and daily tending.”

“Septa?” Haldon asked having noticed the look on her face. He stepped up to her, concerned.

“I . . .” she paused and swallowed, meeting Haldon's eyes for a moment before turning to look at Aegon. “I thought it was just a trophy. A sentimental token to remind you of who you were. The history of your ancestors. I thought to gift it to you on the day you took your crown and sat upon the Iron Throne.”

Aegon had turned his full attention to her, his hand still resting on Winter’s muzzle. His voice sounded small, hopeful, when he finally spoke, “Gift me what?”

“I can’t be sure,” she glanced back to the dragon, “but I think it . . . it must be a dragon egg.”

Jon’s eyes widened a tad and he leaned heavily against the side of Winter’s neck. The dragon was eying the septa herself and let out a chuffing hiss. All this time . . . the septa had never gifted Aegon anything of the sort. Either she died before he took the throne—the few times Jon witnessed it—the vessel she traveled on sunk, or Jon or Aegon died before he could take the throne. It must have existed . . . but Jon had never heard anything of it before.

Aegon darted a look to him and, after taking in the shocked expression on his face, looked back at
Septa Lemore. He narrowed his eyes at her, face serious and hard as if cast in stone. “Where is it?”

She glanced at him, blinked, and then smiled faintly. “In a chest in my cabin. I—I’ll show you when we return to the ship.”
Late Summer Part XVI

After Winter took off, disappearing in the distance, high up in the clouds, it was as if Aegon couldn’t move quick enough. He was the first to mount and was fidgeting with impatience as they all followed suit. If he’d had the choice, Jon was sure he’d have ridden his horse off at a gallop towards Volantis. As it was his brother managed to rein himself in.

Jon remembered that feeling, once he knew that Winter existed, the tug he’d always felt towards the crypts made sense and from when he first learned she existed until he laid her egg in the fire in his room . . . he’d felt an itching under his skin. Though Aegon had never mentioned anything, perhaps he’d felt a similar tug, but being so close the source had been unable to identify it to a place. Perhaps he’d misconstrued it as a connection to the vessel, to his current home.

As they rode, a bit quicker back than they had come, Griff brought his horse alongside Jon’s. He was quiet for a bit, watching the back of Aegon a bit ahead of them.

“I don’t trust you,” he said finally, voice low and rough, barely able to be heard over the thud of their horse’s hooves.

Jon glanced at him, schooling his features. “I mean no ill will towards him, or to the rest of you.”

“You say that now,” Griff slanted pale blue eyes towards him, “but things change.” He glanced over at Jon’s guard, at Ghost loping on a nearby hillside, enjoying his freedom. “You may be a dragon, but you’re also a wolf.”

“Direwolf,” Jon corrected idly and then inclined his head, “I have no wish to bear a crown in this life. I promise you that. I love my family, yes, and I will not betray them, but that doesn’t mean I will betray Aegon either.”

“Your lord uncle supports the usurper.”

“My lord uncle and his bannermen’s interests currently lay elsewhere,” Jon stated calmly, shifting slightly in his saddle, “The North will soon have little time for the wars of the south. Winter is Coming, my lord. A harsh one. One that, if we are lucky, our children’s children’s children will one day tell tales of.”

“Stories of deep snow and frost nipping at noses and cheeks?”

“Thousands of years ago, the first men built a Wall more magnificent than any structure in the known world. They did so after a long winter that blanked the land in snow and ice and lasted more than a generation,” Jon glanced off to the side, watching as Ghost shot off after a hare or some similar creature. “They didn’t build the wall to keep out the weather, my lord, nor did they do so to keep out the wildlings. They were one people then. Now the Free Folk are fleeing south, willing to work with my lord uncle and his bannermen and to do so after thousands of years of hostility.” He slanted a dark look towards the exiled lord. “Do you think they run from snow and ice?”

“Bedtime stories to scare children,” Griff scoffed a bit, jaw clenching, and glanced to the side.

“If they were, do you think Lord Stark would be placing so much effort in rebuilding the Nights Watch, in making a promise of neutrality at worst should Aegon decide to invade the South to retake his throne?” Jon asked, raising an eyebrow as he stared at the man. A man that, had it not been his uncle that chose to call him ‘Jon’ could possibly have been his namesake. “We have more pressing matters to contend with.”
“And yet here you are, halfway across the world playing games—”

“I don’t play games, my lord,” Jon bit out. “I care not for thrones nor petty politics. I’ll do what I have to for the survival of my people, but I loathe the thought of sitting on the melted lump of a chair so many aspire to. If I did wish to sit my ass on the damn thing do you think I would be here? Do you think I would be so willing to show you Winter or tell my brother, should he have an egg, how I hatched her? I could have had her burn the Shy Maid to ashes in the middle of the night and returned to the Iron Bank to claim the family fortune for myself. I’m listed as the heir and the Iron bank would care not as to how the head of family lost their life so long as the funds were no longer stagnant. Instead, I came to find him and tell him of the funds so he can use them.”

Griff said nothing, turning to stare ahead at the back of his charge. His jaw flexed visibly.

“I’m not asking you to trust me,” Jon said after a few minutes of silence. “It’s far too soon. I haven’t earned it yet. I’m asking you to trust that in my eyes, and in the eyes of Lord Stark, there are more important things at stake than who sits on the Iron Throne. If we could have our wish the South would remain at peace and send all its armies to the Wall to support the realm in the war to come.” He paused, waiting until Griff met his gaze again. “I think you, as well as I, know that the South would rather tear itself apart than believe the words of northern barbarians. Too many would rather stab each other in the back and let the realm fall if it meant they could grasp at the remnants of power.”

“And you believe Aegon will be different.”

“I know that dragons brought the kingdoms together once,” Jon said plainly, “and that most educated people haven’t forgotten the destruction they can bring. And I know there are still those in the Seven Kingdoms who hope and plan for a Targaryen restoration.”

“One . . .” Griff grit his teeth before continuing, “or even two dragons won’t be enough to make every lord kneel. And from what you said you won’t join the fight should King Robert still sit the throne.”

“I won’t risk Winter without cause,” Jon confirmed. “But who can say if it will just be two dragons?” he asked, doing his best to keep the smile from quirking his lips. “We aren’t the only Targaryen’s still alive.”

“Viserys is mad,” Griff shot him a look, “and Daenerys is under his heel.”

“Daenerys has been wed to Khal Drogo,” Jon glanced over at him. “I’m sure the Khal will not appreciate . . . inappropriate behavior towards his wife for long.” He paused for a moment, eyes scanning the hills. “I also heard a rumor she was gifted three stone eggs.”

“You know quite a lot for a boy who hadn’t left the North until a few moons ago.”

“I suppose I do,” he agreed, eyes finally catching sight of Volantis over the hills in the distance. Jon could feel Griff’s eyes on him, boring into the side of his head.

Jon had already spoken to Aegon on the subject and would continue to in the weeks to come. That didn’t mean he had to share anything of his past with Jon Connington or anyone else. It was his choice who he spoke with, about who knew. Even Lord Stark had requested permission before telling Lady Catelyn and Robb. His brother had already promised him to remain silent on the subject, to prevaricate where certain information originated from.

Staying silent on the matter had only served to upset Aegon’s surrogate father as to how and why
the young man was placing so much trust with Jon. But Jon didn’t care, so long as Griff didn’t place a dagger in his back or heart, the man could seethe to his heart’s delight.

Aegon regained some manner of sense and patience by the time they finally reached the city, the shifting of the muscle at his jaw and jerk of his hands the only sign of his desire for everyone else to hurry. The man who had allowed them use of the horses for some coin seemed surprised to see them so soon, his age and sun wrinkled countenance underpinned by annoyance as he handed over the collateral coin.

Jon thanked the man with a smile and turned to join Aegon and Duck where the young man waited just outside of the main path on the cobblestone road. “It won’t be long,” he said softly as they fell in step together, Luca and Duck behind them. Haldon and Septa Lemore were a bit in front of them, surprisingly, considering Aegon’s previous rush. The others were trailed behind them, but for Griff who stalked forward to walk beside them.

“It’s been too long,” Aegon countered sharply and then glanced at him apologetically. “How old did you say she was?”

“About two and a half years,” Jon answered. “A little less.”

“And only just the size to ride.”

“I could have ridden her a moon or two ago,” he corrected, “I think, but then and now is not the time or place.”

“You’re very patient, brother,” Aegon said, raising an eyebrow, “I worry you may be more so than I.”

“I’ve had plenty of time to learn patience,” Jon bumped his shoulder against Aegon’s, stepping into his brother’s space for a brief moment as they walked. “You’ll have plenty of time to learn it.”

Ysilla was mending the frayed edge of a sail when they arrived at the dock, Aegon striding aboard first, passing Haldon and the septa swiftly with his long strides. She looked up at him and then glanced over the group quickly, lips set in a line.

“If you expect me to cook for such a large group, someone will need to go to the market,” she called to them.

“Our guests won’t be staying,” Griff said, voice tight as Jon sped his pace up to follow Aegon towards the cabins.

His brother hadn’t lost all sense of propriety; he waited for Septa Lemore to enter her room before trailing after her as Jon stood in the doorway, watching.

The woman crossed over to the bed and knelt on a pale violet rug with splashes of blue and white. It was well taken care of and embroidered with little stars that blended well into the floral pattern. Adjusting her skirts, she then leant down and reached beneath the bed, feeling around for a moment. It was mere seconds before she found what she sought and pulled it out. Her fingers clenched around the edges as she stared at it, face a blank mask, lips pressed tight together.

It was a small chest, locked with a simple key which she soon slipped out from under the mattress
with shaking fingers. By the time it was unlocked, Aegon was kneeling next to her, his hands fisted against his thighs.

She glanced up at him, face shifting slightly at the sight of him, emotions warring between her eyes. “Your mother gave this to me,” the septa admitted, her voice rough, a few moments later, “when she begged me to take you from King’s Landing. She was so worried for your safety,” she reached out and touched his cheek, cupping it. Her fingers still quaked a bit. “I wished I could have helped your sister as well . . . but she was too old, too known.” Her fingers were still shaking as they settled on the lid, nails clacking against the wood. “Not many knew your looks, other than your pale hair and violet eyes . . . it was easier to switch you. Babies are harder to distinguish, even your strands were similar to the tow heads of many infants.”

But not the eyes. Only those with Valryian . . . or Dayne blood had a variant of purple eyes in Westeros. There were a few families on Dragonstone that had Valyrian blood, but to smuggle a child from there?

She had her back to him, but Jon knew her eyes must glisten with tears from the sound of her voice. He’d heard this tale before. He knew the parts she left out. She had loved Elia deeply, like a sister, and had made a heart-wrenching choice that Jon didn’t know if he would have been able to—not if the fate of his own child hung in the balance. He had, after all, arranged for Gilly to take Mance’s son to Old Town when the Red Witch’s words spoke of ill deeds. But he’d never had to make the choice regarding a child of his own blood.

“Septa?” Aegon looked up at her frowning slightly.

Shaking her head, she cleared her throat and quickly flipped the lid open. A mass of cloth was visible, simple linen. Reaching out she pulled it away to reveal the dragon egg hidden within.

Jon stepped forward, just a pace, to watch as his brother reached out with shaking hands and gently scooped it up.

Aegon held it in front of him, eyes locked on the scaled surface. It was dark, almost entirely black but glinted gold in the light filtering in from the open window. As he turned it, the surface shimmered slightly with a hint of red and burnt orange.

“It’s warm,” he breathed, eyes lifting to meet Jon’s for a second as a smile softened his features. “It’s beautiful.”

Jon smiled back at the wonder and delight in his brother’s eyes. He remembered that feeling and the soft snap of the bond beginning to sharpen in the back of his mind. If he died tomorrow, Jon was glad to know that in any future life he lived he’d be able to help his brother fill that gap in his soul just as he had.
Interlude: Ygritte Part I

The wind howled outside the tent; she rolled over in her furs, letting out a long breath. Irina and Cairen had quieted down across the tent, the low moans and quick breaths had come to a head several minutes ago. Her eyes blinked open and stared at the tent wall as it rustled in the breeze.

She heard rustling outside, low voices, a bit of laughter, nothing out of the ordinary. There were near eighty in their village most days, closer to twice that now as clans came together to harvest the crops sown in the nearby fields several moon turns ago and to share the bounty of the gardens they took turns tending as they shifted camps, following the migrations of herds and fish through the land and rivers.

A branch snapped nearby and, suddenly too warm, she pushed the furs down. Ygritte wore but her rough spun wool undergarments, stained with age and tattered at the edges. Pushing herself over she grabbed her outerwear and began to pull her breaches and tunic on, followed by her coat. As she slipped her boots on, tying them, the form that shared her furs rolled over and blinked up at her.

“Ygritte?” the voice was sleep rough and the boy slipped up onto his left elbow, blinking at her with grey-blue eyes.

“No one’s to leave camp.” Ygritte told him, knife still angled toward him. “I’ll be back and if

“Good thing I’m not ‘no one’,” Ygritte told him, knife still angled toward him. “I’ll be back and if
I’m not, then I’m not.”

“Whatever, girl,” he stepped back, shifting the spear he held, trailing it across the thick coating of frost on the trampled dirt and grass ground. “No skin off my bones if you get yourself dead.”

Stalking off into the night, she followed the river, choosing her steps carefully and listening to the sounds of nightlife about her. As the sky began to grey her eye caught on a male wood duck, it’s blue and white crested head shimmering as it dipped into the freezing water to find its own breakfast.

Kneeling, Ygritte readied her bow, carefully feeling the arrow she pulled to ensure it wasn’t the one with the ribbing near the fletching. She notched the arrow, eyed the duck as it neared the shore, and then drew, aimed, and let loose. Her arms barely had time to feel the burn before she was standing, hurrying down the shore to retrieve her kill.

The sky was beginning to turn colors, pinks and purples, a splash of red on the horizon, as she snagged it from where the body had caught on a couple of rocks. With great luck, Ygritte had barely gotten splashed by a few spits of the river’s waves as it lapped against the rocks and carried on downstream.

She was halfway back to camp, her kill slung over her shoulder, tied alongside her quiver, when she heard the screams.

The air had cooled considerably, a contrast to previous mornings when it seemed to warm with the sun. She could see a light fog obscuring parts of the camp.

Her body tensed, frozen for barely a second, breath leaving her. “Yngve,” breathed out from between her lips and she pulled her bow forward and notched another arrow as her feet found their footing and she sprinted back to camp.

Flames were dancing from tents here and there, bodies burning as men, women, children—everyone—scattered about. Some fought with spears and knives, anything they had handy. Ygritte loosed one arrow into the eye of a corpse; its body fell back two paces before righting itself and turning towards her. It was Shiori, one of the old spearwives from the visiting clans who tossed a burning rag, wrapped bout a rock at it, catching it alight.

Not stopping to acknowledge the assistance, Ygritte skittered through camp, grabbing up a torch someone had dropped upon the ground at some point. Around her chaos reigned, but there was only one thing on her mind.

“Yngve!” she called as she neared the tent her family shared—what remained of it since her mother’s death and elder sister being stolen a year past—heart beating like sound of a heard elk trampling through the forest. The body of one of her clansmen, throat torn out, appeared before her eyes bright blue as a clear summer sky, brighter even.

She dodged to the side as it slashed at her with the bronze knife it held in its hand. She rolled through the mud, landing awkwardly on her elbow as she tried to keep the torch out of the muck. Swiping at it, she growled as it dodged and stabbed at her again. As she skittered through the mud, feet slipping as another form—a body but bones with decayed flesh sloughing off its skeletal form practically ran into her. A quick stab of the torch caught the wight on fire and she twisted back in
time to barely slip away from the other dead man as it stabbed at her again.

It froze suddenly, a thin line of metal sliding out its chest, poking toward her. In an instant it swerved, slashing out with the knife it held. A scream of pain reached her ears, but she was already moving, slamming the torch into its back, knocking it aside as it caught on fire.

Yngve was standing on the other side of the body as it fell, eyes wide and mouth open, face grimaced in pain and fear.

“Yngve!” Ygritte dashed forward to him, catching him as he swayed. He wore little more than what he wore to sleep in. His feet were bare, but he had donned his coat. She caught him before he could move as his face turned white. “Where’d it get you?” she asked, eyes darting about them even as she spoke, looking for more forms even as the screams were more distant. She dragged.

He swallowed and touched his right arm and chest with his left, words failing him.

She could see the blood flowing, the slash in his furs, but couldn’t see the wound itself.

“Ygritte?” he murmured, voice shaky. “Am I—”

“No,” Ygritte told him, cutting him off, “You’ll be fine, lil’red.”

A screech nearby caught her attention and she heard more screams. She turned and her eye caught on a form towards the other side of camp. It was pale, with bone-white hair and skin the color of frost. It sat upon a dead horse, a few wights still prowling about it.

Ygritte could hear the shouts of the people still around her, calling for everyone to run, to turn tail escape.

“Ygritte,” her little brother’s voice murmured behind her and she knew the pain in it . . . had seen enough of the wound to know that he wouldn’t be able to make an escape with her. Not and survive it.

“Sit, Yngve,” she told him softly, gently, “just for a bit.”

Ygritte took her bow up from the ground and reached behind her, fingers fiddling each arrow until she found the one with the ribbing. It had been a gift, one of three given to her clan by Mance Rayder’s men when they came recruiting and spreading the news of a life south of the Wall being offered by the kneeler Lord Stark. As the best shot in the village, Ygritte had been chosen to wield one of them.

After this harvest, they were meant to go south, the entire clan. Originally, she had planned to leave moons ago, to join Mance and his men to prepare to take the Wall. Without the need to fight the Crows, she’d elected to stay here instead, with her family, and travel south with the clan. To protect them along the way.

She breathed out, breath shaky, knocked the arrow, drew, and let loose. It wasn’t a perfect shot, but it was good enough. It speared the Other in its shoulder, slamming into it to knock it back, tilting it towards the back of the dead horse. Then it shattered, falling to pieces, a scream that sent shivers down her spine cutting off as it fell to pieces before her eyes.

The death of the White Walker was enough to rally the remaining men and women of her clan to fight back and burn the wights that still fought. There were no Others close enough to raise any more of the dead on that day.
Ygritte spent what felt like hours defending her little brother, one hand helping place pressure on his wound, before finally receiving assistance from several clansmen.
It wasn’t even autumn yet, and the frost coated everything along with a fine layer of snow, inches deep in the open, but just a dusting under the trees. They left the village, burning near everything including the bodies of the dead, that they couldn’t take with them. A few horses and mules survived the assault, scattered into the forest and were tracked down once the sun rode high in the sky.

There were less than forty of them that survived between the two clans after the wounded were tended or given mercy. Ygritte had been worried for her brother—all but one of her close cousins had perished, along with her Aunt—the cut into his arm was deep and many such festered quickly. The bronze dagger that gave him the cut had shined, she remembered, cleaned perhaps the night before.

The woods witch that tended her brother’s wounds was honest and clear. If it was kept clean of infection Yngve would live, but he might not ever have full use of his arm again. A handsome scar would grace his chest as well, slicing across his nipple—but men had no use for them anyway—and tapering at the center of his chest.

Ygritte was fastidious in making him clean it with boiled water and then paste the witch prescribed, even as it took time out of their travel to fetch ingredients from the hidden herb gardens that dotted the landscape. It gave them reason to search them out, at least, picked over as they were by other clans traveling south.

She remembered when Mance’s riders had come through camp, her grand plans to join them shattering with the knowledge she could take her family South. The man had gone from King Beyond the Wall to a leader of legend, the man who treated with the Starks and brokered safe passage. No death would come to those that made it south.

Ygritte had rolled her eyes in disbelief at first when she heard, stabbing her knifed into one of pike her cousin and little brother had caught earlier that day while she’d been hunting with her aunt and another cousin. Gutting it, preparing to roast it in front of the fire.

The whole of it, all the words spewing from the spearwife’s mouth, had sounded sickly sweet and too grand to be truth. The dark-haired woman had stayed the night, stealing off into her cousin Jaren’s tent, before slipping away the next morning atop her horse. She and her compatriots had left behind the three arrows with pretty tales surrounding them of what they could do to a White Walker.

Ygritte hadn’t believed them, but her skill with the bow was widely known and when the elder had held it out to her, she’d taken it. Hours had been spent, sitting in front of the fire, staring at the light dance on the edges of the dark, sharp stone. Ebony, green, blue, hints of purple.

Joining Mance had still been on the table, only this time she would be joining with her family already safe. That had been before, though, now all her thoughts were of what the future held. Of what life she could make for her brother and cousin. The eldest at eight and ten years, it was her duty now to see them to adulthood, until they could wield their own spears in battle. As she tended Yngve’s wound, helping him clean it and wrap it in the fresh leaves of winter cabbages they picked in the garden patches as they traveled.

This land, this frozen land, her people’s ways, Ygritte knew. She wanted nothing to do with the kneelers and their precious laws. A cage of one’s mind, Old Torghen’s words rang from the
memories of her youth. But now she had little choice. Not if her little brother was to have any sort of life.

Originally, there had been little debate among the elders on which course to take, already wights had taken the lives of a dozen clan members on hunts and trading trips as they trekked further west and north. A half dozen other clans had already abandoned villages, even as the last harvest before autumn neared. Rumors spread from clans further north and west, those whose paths took them closer to the Frost Fangs and Milkwater. Most had argued that it was better to take their chances with sweet promises made by Lord Stark then face the White Walkers and their army of dead.

At least men would die when you stuck an arrow through their heart. The dead kept coming.

So it had been decided, after harvest they would take what they gleaned and head south to the Wall. The Others had come too soon, before they were ready. They should have left sooner.

They could see it from leagues away, the Wall, a tall, ever-present monument reminder of the past. As it drew closer every day during their trek through the Haunted Forest, her heart raced more often, worry and fear edging at the back of her mind. Ygritte had long been taught that Crows were not to be trusted. They killed her cousins, her father, perhaps, as he’d disappeared on a hunt with a half dozen other men near the Frost Fangs.

Every person she ever talked to had stories to tell of loved ones lost to the Crows, except perhaps the rare clan that had lived most their lives secluded in the mountains or far North before the wight attacks had increased and the sightings of White Walkers on their undead steads had shed the veneer of legend into present reality. Before Mance Rayder began his campaign near fifteen years ago, to unite as many of the Free Folk he could.

“Will we have to climb it?” little Yngve asked one evening as they sat afore the fire, biting his lip as they shared a bag of tart frost berries they had picked earlier that day after stumbling upon a small patch and garden that hadn’t been entirely picked through by wildlife and other passing clans. His grey-green eyes peered up at her, questioning.

Yngve was all of ten, the last child their mother birthed and the harshest on her. Their other siblings, full or half, were dead or gone to other tribes. The clan had seen nor heard hide or hair of her elder sister Dashta since they traded with that damned Thenn tribe two years gone. On nights when the moon was high and full, she cursed the time she’d spent with that stupid oaf of a Thenn boy while her sister was disappearing into the night. They’d never gotten to say goodbye or see her dancing with her man as they might of if he’d been of a different clan.

She reached out and scrubbed a hand through his strawberry blonde locks, making him scrunch his freckle covered nose at her and duck away. He winced then, using his left hand to adjust the sling his right had been placed in.

Ygritte sighed, trying to keep the worry from her voice as she watched him. “Don’t think so. Not if the Crows are telling the truth.”

“Jakshi says the land south of the wall is greener than the needles of the Sentinel Tree and stretching as far as the eye can see.”

“Jakshi is full of shit,” Ygritte snorted, rolling her eyes, “but he ain’t completely wrong. He went
raiding years ago.”

“Before a Crow shot him in the knee?”

“Aye, before that.”

“They aren’t going to shoot at us, are they?” he asked her, rolling a bright red berry between his fingertips.

“I’ll shoot any that tries,” Ygritte promised as she popped another berry into her mouth. She bit into it, the juices squirting across her tongue and teeth. She smiled at her brother, knowing that it would look as if blood coated her teeth.

He popped a berry into his own mouth, following her example, and grinned back at her, wide and open. “I’ll gut them if they get close,” he promised her, the fingers of his left hand dropping to the bronze short sword strapped to his belt. “Just like I did that wight.”

“You do that, lil’red.” She smiled at him and ruffled his messy hair with red-stained fingers, smudging the sticky fluid in his hair as he swatted at her hands.

They ran into more groups of Free Folk the closer to the Wall they got and in the distance the ever-present looming presence of that great divide—the reminder that their Freedom was, in many ways, limited. Perhaps it might grow more so, in the land beyond that giant hunk of ice, but at least they would live. At least her brother might live.

They were near two hundred strong by the time they were a single day walk from the Wall. A Free Folk scout had seen them, directing them towards the castle, Oakenshield they called it, that had been opened for use by the Free Folk and a small garrison of Stark men to direct the migration south.

It took an additional day of travel, traveling in the gap between the wall and three Haunted Forest. The forest was being clear cut to a league of the wall, workgroups of Crows, southroners, and even Free Folk and a few Giants hacked away during daylight hours, transporting the fallen trees on long sleds pulled by workhorses and the occasional mammoth towards the Wall. To help fortify the castles, were the murmurs, rebuild what the Crows had let fall to ruin.

The entry to Oakenshield looked freshly cleared, large boulders were nearby, deep gouges in the ground that reminded Ygritte of sleigh tracks from plains Giants sleighs, or what Old Torghen told them were sleigh tracks. The packed prints of mammoths in the ground, gouged deep in places, were clearer evidence of what cleared the blocked passage than anything else. Free Folk guards stood nearby, representatives of a dozen different clans, each able to speak the tongues of different regions in addition to common.

Twenty at a time, they were told, could pass through. Total horse shit since the passage had been cut high enough for a mammoth to pass through, but they didn’t argue. There was an area cleared nearby, a wouldn’t wall built high and reinforced with a foot of stone on the three sides that faced away from the Wall where a camp had been set.

It took just two days for Ygritte and Yngve to gain entrance, along with her cousin and the rest of their clan. During that time, they were taught of the agreement, the laws they’d have to abide by, the rules they’d have to know and respect, even if they could ignore them within their own communities.

What surprised her most was how quick they were to let the injured through—the sick were kept
apart, but cared for—but Ygnve’s injury was what bought her and the remainder of their clan quicker passage south of the Wall.

Ygritte had been hesitant, at the offer by one of the men bearing the direwolf sigil, to have her brother seen by the castle’s healer man, a maester, but accepted because it wasn’t healing as quickly as it should have been. The trip had been long, and a few times Yngve had burned hot a bit, but nothing that lasted long.

It was a young man that met them, grey-robed and fumbling a bit with the tools he had. He’d apologized, stating that he was fresh from training, recently forged his chain, but had seen dozens of similar injuries before. Accidents, he called them, injuries when working the field or building. He said he was here on loan as well, having decided to seek out places where he could further his knowledge and help those that were injured.

She’d rolled her eyes, but listened to his mumblings, understanding that he preferred to treat those injured doing good rather than those injured in fighting one another for petty reasons like gold or whores.

About them, in the long room he was set up in, there were several dozen beds with half a dozen men and women laying or sitting upon them.

“The, uh, woods witch,” he had frowned at term, “was correct in her assessment. It is healing quite well, all things considered. You said you wrapped it in . . . winter cabbage leaves?”

“Aye,” Ygritte nodded, “after washing them in boiled water and using the herb paste.” She’d dictated the ingredients to his mumbling, having to clarify several of the ingredients. “The witch said it was better than using rags.”

“That it is . . .” He prodded at the center of the wound to Yngve’s right arm, causing her brother to gasp and shiver in pain. “There is, of course, damage that may not be healed . . . but I believe that the redness here . . . you said he had a fever last week?”

“He did, but it burned away quick.”

He looked down at Yngve, brown eyes peering down a crooked nose. “And now? Have you felt anything, burning or chills?”

“It itches about the edges,” Ygnve bit his lip, “I can’t help but scratch it sometimes . . . usually at night.”

“That is not a good thing to do,” the maester said and ‘hmmed. He paced away to a long shelf, examining jar after jar. He returned after scooping a quarter of the contents of one jar into another, which he carried to them. “I believe there is a pocket of infection that needs to be cleared out where the redness is here,” he prodded gently, causing Yngve to wince, “I can do that in just a few minutes, if you wish.” He lifted the jar. “This will help with both any remnants that remain and the itching. Just a dab before bed should be enough under fresh bandages.” He leaned in to look Yngve straight in the eye. “You mustn't itch. The feeling means your wound is healing strong . . . when you do you can contract infection such as this.”

“And if the healing isn’t done when the ointment runs out?”

He paused and looked up at her, considering her for a moment. “I can show you the ingredients, but the mix must be done just so. I can instruct, but you must listen.”

“Do what you need to do,” Ygritte cut him off before he could continue to lecture her brother.
“Then show me what I will need to.” Her eyes were narrowed as she eyes the man. “I’ll make sure he lets it alone from now on.” A crooked smile split her face. “I know how to make a potion and poultice and can follow instructions. My moon teas never failed.”

He nodded, a slight flush working up his neck as he bumbled about getting ready to treat Yngve’s wound. As comely as he was, the maester was also skinny and short. A weak man that Ygritte could bet wouldn’t have lasted alone even a night if let alone beyond the Wall.

She let her brother hold onto her arm with his good hand as the maester cut into him and drained it. More than she thought possible exited the wound and then the maester burned it with ale and Yngve couldn’t help the cry of pain that left his mouth.

Ygritte pressed her lips together, holding him to her side, as the maester knit Yngve’s wound back together with the finest thread she had ever laid eyes on, and the slimmest, sharpest needle.

“Ygritte?” her brother’s voice sounded small later that night as they lay side by side in their tent just south of Oakenshield, surrounded by trees with the greenest leaves and needles they had ever seen. Even the grass seemed brighter against the brown dirt beneath it.

“Yes?” she murmured back, rolling to face him.

He was laying on his back, the most comfortable position for him to sleep. He peered at her in the darkness. It wasn’t nearly as cold here as it was just on the other side of the Wall. Their furs were enough for them. Their furs and the warmth from their cousin and clansmen they shared the tent with. Their once large clan, bigger than most in the region they lived, reduced to just a few. Families extinguished from the world leaving but memories behind.

“What is going to happen to us?” he asked and she could see the fingers of his left hand tracing the still ones of his right. He could twitch them, on occasion, but every move he made beneath his right shoulder sent shivers of pain coursing through him.

She bit her lip. “I don’t know,” she admitted after a long moment, “but I do know one thing.”

“What?”

“Whatever happens,” Ygritte said, shifting in the furs, freeing her arm so she could reach out and ruffle his hair, “we’ll be together. And that is all that matters now.”
The sun was high in the sky, closer to midday than true morning, as they stood upon a low rising hill perhaps a two-day ride from White Harbor, heading north. It was a beautiful day, recently cut crops shooting, reaching back to the sky, bright green and swaying in the gentle breeze. The fields around them were relatively flat, but for the gentle swell of hills and the rise of a barrow nearby with crops growing around it. There were sprigs of bright blue and white wildflowers trailing over the man-made feature.

The sky was clear except for a few, puffy white strands of clouds overhead. A gentle, summer day perfect in all ways. If Sansa had been at home she would have begged to spend the day outdoors, under the open sky. Perhaps she’d have settled in the grass near the Heart Tree with Lady at her side, braiding flowers together as her younger siblings ran and screeched about or watched her elder siblings trade blows with Theon and members of the guard in the practice ring.

It was a day that should have been filled with laughter, smiles, squeals of delight. Of playful banter and strings of Frost Fringe, Sun Drops, and Maiden’s Kisses twisted together to form crowns. Rickon was of an age now where he could claim a part in the childish make-believe games . . . the parts that Robb and Jon fought over when they were younger. She would act reluctant but secretly loved it when her siblings slew imaginary beasts and evil lords to save her.

But, for all its beauty, today was not a perfect day; nor was it a day of playful smiles and childish giggles.

Sansa shuddered as she watched two Stark guards lead a man, perhaps a few years older than her brothers—Robb and Jon—to stand before her father and a wild, dark-haired man with streaks of white in his curly beard and a mix of grey-white furs and rough sewn garments that spoke of his wildling heritage. Her sister stood by her side, fidgeting and bouncing on the balls of her feet. Sansa glanced at her pressing her lips together. Arya almost seemed excited at the prospect of witnessing justice, and perhaps she was. Her little sister had always had an interest in fighting and the stories of battles. She preferred blades to sewing and crochet needles. Arya would spend her day following Robb or Jon around if she could, pestering them, Ser Rodrik, or anyone she could into teaching her of the sword or fisticuffs. Their older brothers weren’t here though, now. Robb was home in Winterfell and Jon was sailing the Narrow Sea or perhaps even in Braavos by now. Sailors never seemed to give the same length of time for traveling from one city to another—a lot depended on the wind and waves. The whim of the Drowned God, Theon had proclaimed more than once when the topic of seat travel was brought up.

She envied Jon a bit. At two and ten Sansa had barely been outside of Winterfell before this trip and with the way her parents had been speaking lately, it seemed as if she may never leave the North.

Turning her gaze back to the man who was kneeling now, before a recently cut log and her lord father, Sansa bit her lip. Father had never brought her along to an execution before and she knew that Robb and Jon had both gone to their first at the tender age of eight name days. She wished that she didn’t have to be here, watching as the man lifted his gaze to stare at her father, whose face was set like stone, grey eyes cold as ice.

Begging her mother to let her stay with the rest of their retinue, to work on her needlework with Jeyne and Septa Mordane, had done nothing. Her mother had sided with her father, insisting that she accompany them to see this man’s execution. Even the septa’s insistence that there was no need
for her, or Arya, to attend had done nothing but earn the woman a glare and a carefully worded reprimand.

Her mother's view of the Seven was different now then it was before . . . before what? Before the direwolves were born, before Jon's heritage was known and Winter flitted about in the sky . . . before everything began to change. Her mother no longer spent as much time educating Sansa on the duties of a southron lady. Sansa's lessons focused more on the North now. She even spent more time in the Godswood than the Sept. Even she could see the change in the people. 'Winter Is Coming' once bandied about with almost a light-hearted smile and teasing pokes now was never said in anything other than dark-edged seriousness.

When once her mother talked of her, Arya, or Bran fostering in Riverrun or the Vale or elsewhere for a year or two when they were older now others fostered with them. Her cousin Robin and even a couple of boys that whispers said were the King's bastards—a Gendry and a Meritt—who practiced with the guards when they weren't apprenticing to the blacksmith and builder respectively. Meritt was a bit shy, but Jon had taken a liking to Gendry for some reason, taking time to teach him a bit of swordplay. Sansa mostly knew that because Arya had complained about it cutting into her own lessons for a few days before going silent on the matter.

Sansa sighed as she hugged her arms to herself, pulling her thin cloak about her as she glanced about the area. Besides the Stark guards there was a small group of perhaps fifteen wildlings, part of a clan that had recently moved into the area after being allotted refuge on lands whose owner, two old women, sisters, had lost their husbands and were told old to run the farm, any surviving children having left to marry or runoff. They had apparently welcomed the assistance of the small clan to assist with tending the land, crops, and herds of sheep and goats.

The Manderly's, Sansa knew, weren't happy about their presence, per se, but they did not object if they followed the agreement that Lord Stark had come to with the wildling leader, Mance Rayder. Not all of the smallfolk, however, deigned to follow their leader’s commands.

“Mi'lord, please,” the man begged, voice strained as he stared up at her father. “T'was just a wildling boy. He was on my land, bow in hand!”

“Your land,” the eldest male wildling scoffed, “we may not be used to borders as you kneelers define them, but we aren’t stupid. That land was owned by the kneeler lord, woods not fields. We were told where we could hunt and where not to stray. Made plenty clear, it was.” He snorted, perhaps at the memory of it. "Old Cleva and Gytha showed us the borders and the land owned by the lords that they allow anyone to hunt. My grandson's body was not five minutes from the land we work, twenty from your closest field. Shot with a bow he was, an arrow in the back.”

“He was just a wildling,” the man repeated, voice rough and pleading as he squeezed his eyes shut. Sansa wasn’t close enough to see, but she thought perhaps he was crying. Her gaze roamed about the onlookers as her father spoke, reciting the crimes and reiterating the law. Behind the clan leader was a woman about an age with him and five young girls. Another middle-aged couple and several old women, white-haired with wrinkled skin. Two young men, perhaps her age or a little older, also stood nearby.

They didn’t look wild or savage, except perhaps their clothing. They looked like what the septa called 'typical northerners'. The man and two of his daughters had dark hair, but the rest had ash-blonde locks or dark auburn hair. She thought most of them had grey or hazel-grey eyes. The men were even of a similar build to her father and many members of the Stark household and guard who traced their lineage back hundreds of years, if not further, to pure Northern roots. The blood of the First Men.
If it wasn’t for the accent coloring their words, their clothes, and their manners, she could have mistaken them for the smallfolk that lived in winter town and the surrounding countryside.

“. . . sentence you to die.”

Her gaze drifted back to her father, standing at the side of the man, Ice in hand, as her mother’s hand settled on her shoulder.

“Don’t look away,” came the low, whispered command from behind her.

Sansa swallowed, eyes focusing on the scene before her. Everything seemed to still for a few seconds, silent but for the flapping of the Stark banners in the wind. She wished she was somewhere, anywhere else; her fingers shook and she sucked in a shuddering breath.

Then Ice cut through the air and through the thick, dirt-covered neck and strands of dark black hair of the man who had cut down a wildling boy. His neighbor of three moons.

The breath left her and she flinched as his head rolled to the ground and settled several feet away. A spray of blood had splattered the alfalfa in front of the stump, the plants still short from the recent harvest. She felt faint at the sight but fisted her shaking hands in the soft fabric of her dress as the world seemed to spin around her. The hand on her shoulder squeezed gently, a reminder that her mother was there with her, supporting her.

“That’s it?” Arya murmured beside her.

What did you expect? Sansa wanted to ask but couldn’t. The man had been speaking moments before but now he was nothing but a corpse. A decaying body that would be burned or buried depending on his family’s custom. A family that hadn’t seen fit to come and watch except for one old man, his grandfather perhaps, who stood opposite of the wildlings, a shock of white hair surrounding a bald spot covered with age spots.

Ice shivered out from her core and through her arms and legs as she found herself unable to look away from the sight of the blood draining from the severed neck of the body. When her father turned to look at them, she finally turned her attention away, eyes finding his.

His eyes were sad, face solemn, the mask falling away as he surveyed her and her sister. Yes, that was it. A single slice with a sword and life was gone, given way to the coldness of death. A person who had once lived, breathed, and perhaps loved gone from the world in an instant.

Sansa had never realized how fleeting life could be before, even after hearing stories and bearing the knowledge of lost relatives. Her Aunt Lyanna, Jon’s mother, had only been a few years older than her when she’d died, of childbed fever Sansa now knew.

She turned and looked up at her mother, who smiled ever so slightly, sadly, at her and reached out to brush a thumb over her cheek. It was then that Sansa realized she was crying. Not for the man, he’d earned that death, but for her family.

Anything could happen between now and when they were to return to Winterfell again. What if something happened to them or Robb, Bran, Rickon . . . what if the ship Jon sailed on sunk in a storm?

What if she never saw one of them again?
The trip from Winterfell to White Harbor was the second-longest Sansa had yet experienced having spent much of her life within the walls of her home, occasionally traveling to visit nearby bannerman—such as the Cerwyns—riding in the Wolfswood, or visiting winter town on occasion. She had always been a bit jealous of her older brothers, Robb and even Jon, who had gone with her father on occasion to visit holds that were farther off. Robb had visited more as heir since, until recently, Jon’s status as a bastard had kept him from joining most trips.

That wasn’t the case now; now they were traveling to the port city to see him off to Braavos while Robb stayed in Winterfell as acting lord. Sansa had almost stayed behind as well, spending days begging her mother and father to allow her to go. They had been reticent but eventually gave in to both her and Arya joining them, perhaps swayed by Maester Luwin’s wise words.

Jon hadn’t appeared happy to see them mount their steeds—and Sansa hadn’t been enthused about riding versus traveling via cart or wheelhouse—his steel-grey eyes simmering with heat. He’d been sullen and brooded more than usual those first few days, sparring with the guards until his tunic was stained with sweat, his curls stuck to his neck and cheeks.

The spent much of the day traveling along the White Knife, catching sight of the occasional barge or riverboat, smallfolk fishing for trout, pike, lampreys . . . one of the guards told her that the last salmon run of summer was due soon, but she hadn’t seen anyone catch one yet when they stopped in the evening or in the carts of smallfolk heading to the small, nearby villages.

Sansa liked to walk, to stretch her legs, as their retinue set up the tents when they stopped for the evening; she liked to think her guard, Litton, was thankful for the reprieve from camp as well. He was quieter than some of the others, closer in age to her father, with grey tinging his sideburns, yet she had witnessed him beating Jon and Robb’s swornswords in the practice ring often enough.

It was beautiful, truly, the setting sun casting brilliant hues of golds, reds, and the slightest brush of violet across the sky. The colors reflected upon the surface of the river, murky green as it was in most places. Lady walked at her side, plodding quietly with her muzzle tilted up as she surveyed the surrounding landscape.

There was a slight breeze in the air that ruffled the ribbons Sansa had tied to Lady’s collar and wrapped about her leash—she was the only one of the direwolves that would wear one—and her skirts. She stumbled slightly, catching on one of the larger stones that lined the side of the river, dislodging it from where it has been set into the ground. Her hand caught on Lady’s back as her direwolf attempted to assist her.

“Are you all right, my lady?” Litton asked, stepping closer.

Catching herself, she felt her cheeks heat up as she glanced his way and then back at the stone. “I am, thank you,” Sansa said, eyes catching on dirt covering the underside of the stone, stark white peeking through in places. There were stones like this of varying sizes along much of the White Knife after its two tributaries met.

“My lady, perhaps it is time to head back?” Litton asked from a pace away. “It is nearly time for supper.”

Lady leaned against her side, yellow-gold eyes staring up at her. The big toe of her right foot ached a bit where it had knocked into the stone. Her riding boots were thick leather, flowers embossed
into the surface along with a dancing wolf. It was just an ache, no worse than any other time she stubbed her toe.

“It is getting late,” Sansa agreed, glancing back over her shoulder to where she could see the slight bend in the river towards where camp was. Just as she turned to look, Winter dove from the sky into the river. A moment later the dragon emerged from the water, droplets spraying through the air creating a rainbow for a brief moment.

Sansa’s breath caught and the sight and she forgot the ache.

“My lady?”

“Sorry, Litton,” she glanced up at him, still smiling. “I am hungry.”

The scent of roasting fish drew Lady and her to one of the fires as they returned to camp; Sansa could feel the thrum of hunger both in her own stomach and that of her companions. She caught the scent of wet dog, or direwolf rather, and wrinkled her nose as she drew closer to the fire and caught sight of Ghost laying a short distance from the flames, belly towards it, as he let the heat dry his fur. Jon sat nearby, along with several of the guardsmen. Surrounding the flames sticks were speared into the ground with fish of various sizes stuck on the end, cooking.

She hesitated a moment before approaching, there was an empty spot at Jon’s side she thought might have been left for Winter, but the dragon was nowhere to be seen. She hadn’t talked to him much during the trip, they weren’t the closest out of all their siblings, and normally she spent the evenings in the company of her mother, Jeyne, and Septa Mordane. Sometimes Arya as well, but her sister was enjoying the trip and spent as much time as she could be flitting between the guards and chasing Nymeria about. Their mother had given up on keeping her in a dress even, as each Arya had donned was caked with horsehair, mud, and dust by the end of the day.

He glanced up at her and smiled, his closed lips tilting up more on the left than on the right. “Sansa,” he murmured and shifted slightly, leaving more room on the fur he was resting. “How are you?” The words seemed awkward, stilted a bit.

“Well,” Sansa replied, taking the move as an invitation to sit, dropping Lady’s leash. “A bit sore,” she admitted, wincing as her muscles protested. Once she made it down and stretched her legs out a bit, they felt much better, though she dreaded the thought of how many more days in saddle they had to go.

Lady wandered over to Ghost and sniffed him, muzzle bumping against his. He rolled over and bared his teeth in an open-mouthed grin, tail sweeping, front legs tensing. She sat down and stared at him, ear flicking.

“You should ride more,” Jon said, eyes turning to watch as one of the other men at the fire checked on the fish in front of him. “And stretch more when we take breaks.”

Pursing her lips, she glanced at him, watching as he squinted across the fire. “Did you help catch the fish?” Sansa asked finally.

“Aye,” Jon nodded, “Ghost did as well.”

The scent that had clung to Jon when she saw him yesterday had subsided some, and she realized that his hair was damp and face clean of dust from the road. “Lady doesn’t care for the river,” she said, glancing back to where Ghost had rolled towards his sister, one paw nearly touching her foreleg. Lady was staring at him, shoulders hunched, lip curled back.
“Are you sure?” he asked, raising a single dark eyebrow as he turned towards her.

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve been taking lessons from Breck, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” Sansa said, glancing away. The wildling man was rough-spoken but well-liked by her siblings. His crass and forthright words grated on the sensibilities that the septa instilled upon her, though. The septa’s disapproving gaze and her mother’s concern had her biting her lip and remaining at the edge of the lessons—no matter that her father’s approval was quick and bright.

“Just as you gain from Lady,” Jon told her glancing to where their direwolves had begun to play, Lady abandoning her manners to tussle in the dirt, “Lady gains from you.”

“These fish are done,” one of the men called over towards them. “Would you like some, my lady, my lord?”

“I would, thank you,” Sansa said, smiling across the flames at the guard as he swiftly prepped a plate for her, removing the fish from the stake. Hunger gnawed at her insides, she’d had little but some berries and jerky since the midday meal.

“I will wait,” Jon said softly, nodding towards the speckled trout in front of him. “Thank you, though, Kyne.”

She repeated her thanks when the plate was placed in her hands with a fork. The fish covered one side while a pile of roasted root vegetables steamed on the other.

“Sansa,” Jon started, voice low, into the silence a bit later.

She glanced towards him as she took a bite of fish, pulling it from the tines.

“Can I ask you to promise me something?” he slanted a glance at her and then looked away.

She frowned, swallowed, and raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“You’ll be meeting a lot of people from different Houses,” Jon’s said, his voice rougher than normal. “Keep your guard about you and be aware. Men, low and high born, may spin pretty words, smile sweetly, but bastard or high don’t let yourself be alone with them.”

“Why would I?” His words were ominous, as if he knew something she didn’t and something sparked within her. Jon knew things that she often found herself wondering how and when he learned. He was a fount of knowledge at times, sometimes seeming to clamp down on the words that threatened to spill from his mouth on topics. She’d noticed in the few lessons they shared, mostly because he was usually so quiet, sullen, had spent much of their childhood brooding unless Robb or Arya dragged him out of it. “I’m to have a guard at least no matter where I go.” She would also be chaperoned around outsiders as well.

Litton was sitting a bit away, near Jon’s guard, making a plate of food for himself while she ate. It was safe here for him to take a break with the other men around them and guards patrolling the edge of camp. Not to mention the presence of four direwolves and a dragon. Winter, she knew, would alert Jon should any trouble head their way.

“Not all men have honor,” he murmured with a sigh. “Most . . . not all men are like father.” Jon turned and met her eyes. “Some take what they want because they can, even if just for a moment.” He bit his bottom lip, grey eyes imploving her. “Be careful, but especially so with the Boltons.”
The last bit was barely a whisper drifting the short distance between them.

She swallowed, eyes locked with him for a long moment, before nodding. “I will.”

Sansa had studied the history of the North, although she had, perhaps, spent much of her lessons begging for the tales of the South. Of knights and tourneys . . . the North didn’t have tourneys or knights, as such. She was well aware of the bad blood between House Stark and House Bolton. House Bolton had been the last to kneel to the Kings of Winter.

Jon smiled then, a gentle twist of his lips, and then pushed himself up and grabbed the stake in front of him, moving towards the other side of the fire to prepare his own meal.

She watched him go for a moment before dropping her gaze, staring at the well-done flesh of the trout on her face. Poking it, she pushed it away from the pile of carrots, parsnips, onions, and potatoes on her plate. A light growl caught her attention and she glanced up, towards where Ghost and Lady sat. Her direwolf had paused in her play; the leash tangled around her back legs hampering her movement. Lady’s attention was on it as she tried to carefully unwind it from about her as Ghost watched, tilting his head. After a few moments, Lady gave up, settled down, and stared at her, a placid expression on her face as Ghost slunk away to the call of another wolf.
White Harbor was beautiful, the whitewashed stone of most of the buildings stood out against the distant waves. The ocean glittered in the distance, bright and blue and disappearing off into the horizon. Sansa rode next to her sister, just behind her father and mother, and in front of Jon. Stark banners flapped in the wind around them, held by members of the guard. Their direwolves strode alongside them, to the right of the road where less smallfolk gathered.

Smallfolk stopped their work to stare and call greetings, and as their horses clopped into town a young man that looked familiar, though she couldn’t place him, perhaps in his twenties or early thirties rode towards them, calling out in greeting.

Her father turned eyes narrowed as the guards around them tensed. He eyed the rider for a moment before smiling widely, returning the greeting. “Edwyle! It has been a long time, cousin.” He waved the guards to let the man slot himself beside them. “You were, what, eight, when I last saw you?”

“Nine, my lord,” Edwyle said, ducking his head a bit. His dark brown hair was cut short, his grey eyes reminded Sansa of her father’s and Jon’s. His skin was darker than most northerners, tanned by the sun, perhaps, but she couldn’t be sure.

Edwyle . . . it dawned on her then that this young man must be from Benjen, son of Artos Stark’s line. A cadet branch of House Stark that had settled in White harbor. There were a few such branches of House Stark, scattered about the North, but most no longer bore the Stark name, either having dwindled to daughters or taking a different name as they settled small holds. She had only met one of their cousins, Myri, from Barrowtown, when she was six as the older girl traveled North to marry a distant cousin of the Umbers, into a small vassal house. Her father had traveled North with the girl to give her away as her own father died during Robert’s Rebellion. Sansa remembered little of her, except that she had grey-green eyes and dark brown hair she’d kept up in tight braids wrapped around her head.

“You’ve grown,” Ned said, eyeing the young man. “Last I heard from your mother, she said you ran off to Essos.”

“I did,” Edwyle acknowledged, glancing curiously at each of them in turn, “but I kept in touch. When I received word that my little sister was set to marry I returned to give her away.” He smiled lopsidedly as he glanced about their small group. “Then I heard my cousins were coming to White Harbor, so I thought to stay a few extra moons. My sister simply adored the gift, my lady,” he said, glancing at Catelyn and inclining his head, “and Lord Woolfield will surely extend his own thanks over the workhorses you provided at the feast tonight, my lord. As I do now.”

“Your father was a good man,” Ned said, reaching over to settle a hand on Edwyle’s shoulder. “He left this world too soon. The least I could do was ensure your sister had an appropriate dowry. You’re family.”

“You’re a sellsword?” Jon’s voice startled her and Sansa glanced back at her brother before turning to eye Edwyle again. He was bedecked in armor, beneath a simple cloak. She saw the line of a sword peeking out at his side.

“A sellsword?” Arya piped in, voice dripping with excitement.

“Aye,” the young man twisted in his saddle to look back at them. She got a better look at his face
then, the typical long Stark face, but his nose wasn’t as sharp as most Northerners. “I fight for the Company of Roses. Have for near ten years now.”

“Your mother never said.” Her father raised an eyebrow as he glanced over their distant cousin’s gear.

Edwyle shrugged, grinning. “I never said.” A sheepish look crossed his face. “I didn’t want to worry her, so I let her think I was working upon merchant ship . . . which I did. For a year or two.”

She saw it then, the emblem embossed on the boiled leather armor he wore, alongside a slightly altered Stark direwolf. His armor was familiar, northern, yet tweaked, edged with something intrinsically foreign. The furs he wore upon his shoulders were likewise exotic, a pale yellow gold.

“You’ll have to tell us of your accomplishments, cousin,” Jon said, voice intrigued, as their horses clattered onto cobblestones and the gate to the tall, pale walls surrounding the city loomed ahead.

“I will.” Edwyle smiled, glancing back at them towards her brother again. “I have many stories to tell, a few my own, but the Company is flush with tales of valor and battle.”

New Castle was gorgeous, glittering in the sunshine, built upon a hill within the cities walls. Like much of the city the stone it was made from was white or whitewashed. It was more lavishly decorated than any castle Sansa had ever been within, the walls covered in beautify tapestries, some dating back to when House Manderly still lived in the reach.

Unlike most northern families, the Manderly’s followed the Seven, the mark of the faith was visible here and there along the walls and in the language used. They respected the Old Gods, however, perhaps more so than her Mother even. A small Godswood grew in one of the courtyards, a transplant legend said from the one that still grew tall within the walls of Wolf’s Den down Castle Stair towards the sea.

Edwyle had broken off from their group when they entered the city, disappearing down a side road towards the house his mother lived in. They would be joining them for the feast this evening at the Merman’s Court from what he’d said, invited by Lord Manderly.

They were greeted in the courtyard by Lord Wyman Manderly, his son and heir Wylis and his wife Leona, and the lord’s granddaughters, Wynafryd and Wylla. Sansa smiled brightly in greeting as they stopped their horses before the lord and his family. Her father was the first to dismount, followed by Jon and then her mother.

“Welcome to New Castle, my lord.” Lord Wyman attempted to bow, his large belly and size barely allowing it. He was even larger now than when he’d visited Winterfell two years past. He smiled widely up at her father before gesturing as he straightened. “New Castle is yours, my liege.”

“Sansa.” She glanced down at Jon, who was holding his hand up to her and reached out, accepting her brother’s assistance down as a stable boy held her horse still.

“Thank you, Jon.”

He nodded and moved off towards where the rest of their family was lining up to greet their bannerman and his family. She followed quickly, making her way to her mother and Arya’s side. Jon stood at the end of the line, coming to a stop on the other side of Arya.
“Her hair’s green,” Arya said, in awe, under her breath, the words barely reaching Sansa’s ears followed by a hissing shush from Jon.

The younger of the two girls before them, Wylla, Sansa knew from her lessons, did indeed have green hair. It was light at the crown of her head and then darkened to a mossy green that nearly matched the color of the Merman’s hair on House Manderly’s sigil.

“…my granddaughters, Wynafryd and Wylla,” Lord Wyman was saying, his voice deep and filled with pride as the girls curtsied.

“Thank you, Lord Wyman,” Ned said clasping arms with the rotund man, “for welcoming us into your home. My lady wife, Catelyn has traveled with me,” he paused as the man greeted her, before continuing, “along with our daughters, Sansa and Arya, and my son Jon.”

“Lady Catelyn,” Lord Wyman kissed the knuckles of her hand in greeting, “as beautiful as ever.” He turned to look at Sansa and her sister next. “Lady Sansa, you are just as beautiful as your mother, and little Lady Arya, you remind me greatly of your Aunt Lyanna. I can see the same fierceness in your eyes that she displayed.” He greeted each of them, just the same as he had her mother before turning to Jon. “And you. I told your father you were a credit to your House, Jon Stark, when I saw you last.” He turned to her father again. “My good daughter will show you to your rooms, if it pleases, my lord. The kitchen staff have been busy, preparing a grand feast. My men pulled in a Frost Whale just yesterday, a pod was sighted near Old Castle, at least twenty strong.”

Her father’s face darkened as the smile had also dropped from Lord Manderly’s lips. She knew of Frost Whales, the idea of them astounded her imagination as greatly as the idea of dragons. Creatures as large as ships, bigger than most other whales that were known. They migrated south in Autumn, rarely seen before the first frost coated the North. The oil derived from them burned brighter and longer than other whale oil; they say it also stank less and that its flame flickered blue.

“Will the pod come by the harbor?” Sansa asked. The book she’d read had described the sight of the giant whales jumping from the waves, bodies creating their own waves as they slammed back into the ocean. They breathed air, unlike most sea creatures, spitting water out of holes along their skulls in great, tall fountains. It would be so wonderful to see them, even if from afar.

“Perhaps,” Lady Leona smiled at her, “they take shelter in The Bite for several moons usually, before heading further south.”

Sansa smiled back. “I would love to see them, if they do.”
The dress Sansa wore was a pale blue, embroidered by her own hand with flowers and pale grey direwolves. It was a recent addition to her wardrobe, she had only just completed it two moons ago. Her mother had advised her carefully on its construction, teaching her how to allow for possible growth not only in height but in other areas of her body as well. She had blushed beat red at some of the subject matter as her mother had also used it as an opportune moment to discuss relations between men and women.

Still, she was proud of the dress. It fit her perfectly. As Jeyne helped her fix her hair into braids, they giggled over who might be present to dance with tonight. While Lord Wyman had no grandsons, he did have cousins and other family. Many of House Manderly’s own bannermen would be present tonight as well and with them would be their sons and daughters.

Arya was pouting, hair done up in traditional northern braids, a grey dress their mother and sewn and embroidered with the Stark direwolf and little blue flowers only slightly wrinkled over her frame. Her sister had obviously had more than just a cloth to wipe away the dust of the road—but then she’d been practically coated in dirt this morning.

The Mermaid Court was stunning, the walls decorated with imagery of all manner of sea life, the floors just as stunning. The painted figures were bright and stood out against a just as stunning, but more understated, background. Sansa wondered idly how often they were touched up to be so vivid and beautiful.

They took their seats at the head table with Lord Manderly and his family. She sat next to Wynafryd and her mother. Arya sat on the other side of Wynafryd next to Wylla and then Jon. At the next table sat Lady Leon’s family, House Woolfield, along with cousin Edwyn and his mother. His sister, Sansa caught that her name was Dyanna during introductions, had dark hair and brown eyes like their mother’s and sat beside the heir of House Woolfield, her husband, Earlrick.

“Does your brother dance?” Wynafryd asked quietly, a bit into the meal, leaning in to whisper to Sansa. There was music playing, but the meal was still underway and most were focused on the food and wine.

She furrowed her brow, glancing at Jon. “He has before,” Sansa told her. “It has been a while since I last witnessed it, but he did learn. Septa Mordane taught him along with Robb and I.” And she hadn’t been happy about it, but Lord Stark had insisted. Those lessons had been around the same time that the Septa had hissed into her ear the meaning of the word bastard and why Jon didn’t bear the same name as the rest of her siblings.

“Hmmm,” Wynafryd’s gaze slid over to Jon, eyes surveying him like Ser Roderick when a new batch of young men and boys were recruited into the guard. Sansa, Jeyne, and some of the other girls oft watched the first few lessons at least. “He is quite handsome,” she mused. “Has Lord Stark betrothed him or your brother Robb to anyone yet?”

Sansa blinked and glanced over at Jon and the back at Wynafryd who was playing with the end of her long braid. “Not yet. He has yet to even discuss betrothals with any of my siblings, or myself... at least to my knowledge.”

“I suppose I shall just have to ask him for a dance then,” Wynafryd said with a grin. “I’m sure Wylla will as well. We’ve both danced with everyone else within ten years of our age dozens of times. It will be nice to have someone new step on my toes.”
“Who might you suggest I dance with?” Sansa asked, biting her lip as she glanced around the room.

“I would have said Eartrick Woolfield, but your cousin stole his heart and will likely keep him busy on the dance floor,” Wynafryd admitted with a wry grin. “My father thought about betrothing us, but Dyanna stole his heart years ago. They were just waiting until she flowered and her mother’s approval. She’s quite nimble on the dance floor, perhaps one of the best dancers in White Harbor.”

Sansa smiled at the sweet tale, imagining what it must have been like for them, falling in love and marrying out of want. Of two dancers twirling about each other, losing themselves in each other’s eyes . . . she bit her lip. “There must be others who are skilled.”

“There are,” Wynafryd said, nodding before taking a sip of wine. “If Deloyd Farwell asks then definitely agree, he may not be the comeliest of men, but he is lovely on the dance floor. Gilby Wykworth on the other hand . . . watch your toes, especially those on your right.”

Sansa pressed her lips together as Wynafryd pointed out each man to her, and commented on a few women’s skills as well, each with a comment on their skills, looks, or tendency to trip into bed with whores.

The slow background ballads turned into rowdy music with a rhythm that sank into her and drew her onto the dance floor not long after, most of her meal gone and a couple of sweet treats in her belly. Her cousin Edwyle had been the first to ask her to dance, after a polite refusal from her mother, and he had pulled her onto the floor with a polite smile and, while not fully knowledgeable in the steps, deft enough footwork and a lovely attitude. From there she had been swept away, dancing with boy after boy, young men, and a few older gentlemen as well.

Out of the corner of her eye she watched as Jon was dragged onto the floor, cheeks flushed red, by Wylla and then traded off between her, Wynafryd, and a dozen other girls. She found herself giggling softly when she saw him try to slip away multiple times only to be swept upon by yet another young woman.

It was near the end of the night, or at least as late as her mother would allow her and Arya to stay, when Jon snagged her away in a bid to separate himself from his line of partners.

“You don’t have to look so unhappy,” Sansa said, pressing her lips together to suppress the giggles itching to escape.

He furrowed his brow at her as they made their way through the steps of the mid-speed song. “I’m not.”

“You have that look,” she said, looking at him pointedly.

“What?”

“The look you get when you don’t want to do something, but know you have to and try not to sulk about it for the world to see.” She lifted her chin, letting out the giggle as he sighed and rolled his eyes.

“Is it that obvious?”

She twisted her lips. “I suppose not . . . but it’s the look you used to get when Robb or Arya would drag you to supper when father was away.” Because mother didn’t like having to look at you then. Sansa glanced away, trying to catch sight of where Winter was in the sky.
Jon smiled tightly and shrugged. “Dancing just is not . . . I’ve never been particularly good at it.”

“You’re not bad, Jon,” Sansa said, furrowing her eyebrow, turning back to him. It was true, she couldn’t remember him ever being great at it. Robb was much better and she’d even preferred dancing with Theon when they were younger, but he wasn’t horrible. He was decent, hadn’t even stepped on her toes yet and Robb generally fumbled at some point, at least once. “If you were I doubt anyone would have asked for a second dance and I know you danced with Wylla at least three times.”

He flushed again, glancing away. “She is very . . . insistent.”

Sansa laughed and glanced towards the head table where her parents were speaking with the Manderly’s. Edwyn’s mother had moved into the seat next to her father, smiling as they spoke. She glanced back at Jon, recognizing that the song was nearing its end.

“Well,” she said, glancing to the side where a few girls were watching, whispering together, “I was thinking about getting some more dessert and I’m a bit parched.”

The relief on Jon’s face was instant and palpable. “Shall I accompany you, my lady,” he asked, a small smile tugging his lips.

She lifted her chin. “I cannot be without an escort, can I?”
There was a small Godswood in New Castle, perhaps a transplant from the one inside Wolf’s Den or another keep if old tales were true. The Heart Tree was younger than any Sansa had seen before but still brilliant white with red leaves as bright as blood. It was in a small garden, a courtyard that didn’t see much foot traffic as many of the rooms nearby were empty.

“Is it true that the Heart Tree in Wolf’s Den grows through windows and walls?” Sansa asked softly, as she stepped before it. Lady slipped away from her side as she dropped her leash, wandering to sniff around a carefully maintained bed of red and pink flowers.

“Aye,” Wylla nodded, stepping beside her, “it does. It is quite a sight to behold, though I’ve only seen it a handful of times. A prison isn’t a place for a lady.” She flicked her green braid over her shoulder and peered at the tree.

“I didn’t know House Manderly followed the Old Gods,” Sansa said lightly, twining a curl from her loose hair around a finger as she glanced around the garden.

“We don’t,” Wylla said with a shrug, “but the North does. Many of our good families do. House Stark does.” She smiled, pale blue eyes dancing in the speckled light filtering through the low branches above them. “We respect the old gods, no matter our belief in the Seven.”

Sansa smiled back and looked up at the tree. It had no face, it’s trunk, she thought, wasn’t even as wide as the edges of Winterfell’s Heart Tree’s, crying face.

“Lord Stark built a sept in Winterfell for Lady Stark . . . do you follow the seven?” Wylla asked lightly after a moment of silence.

“I follow both,” Sansa admitted, reaching out to touch the white bark. It sent shivers up her spine, pinpricks of ice. “The Old and the New, my lord father’s and lady mother’s gods.”

“I would like to,” Wylla said softly. “I think. Our maester,” she wrinkled her nose, “and septa frown when I ask questions, but House Manderly has lived in the North for a thousand years. Our liege follows the Old Gods . . . most of our bannermen as well.”

“My father told me once, when I was worried that the Gods would be angry that I follow both, that faith is personal. You can choose which to follow, but that doesn’t diminish the power of any other. Not if they are truly Gods.” She tilted her head, and pulled her hand away, fingertips trailing over the bark. “Even forsaking them doesn’t diminish the truth.” She folded her hands in front of her over the belt of her green dress.

Lady sidled up to her, sitting placidly at her side, tail swishing lightly through the short, emerald green grass.

“I’ve heard stories from merchants and sailors of miracles performed by followers of some Gods,” Wylla said looking at Lady, eyes trailing over the pink ribbons braided around her collar and trailing down her back and neck. “Does that make them more valid?”

Sansa furrowed her brow as she leaned down to snag the braided leash and looked at the older girl curiously. “Miracles?”

Wylla nodded. “They say that the Red Priestesses can save the lives of those who should die, can make illusions, and see the future. The faceless assassins of Braavos can change their face to
commit their deeds and disappear.”

Chewing her lip, Sansa shied away from the seriousness of the conversation, turning fully to the other girl with a curious smile gracing her lips. “May I ask—do not feel by any means obligated to answer—but why do you dye your hair green?”

The green-haired girl broke out into a trill of giggles and then reached out to flick a lock of Sansa’s hair. “If I had your shade, fire bright and eye-catching, my lady, I would neither want nor feel the need to color my locks.”

Sansa glanced at the waves of red trailing down her shoulders and breasts. She knew her hair was considered lovely, and she had time and time again been told how beautiful she was. It was even brighter than her mother’s, a shinier crimson that glowed and glinted in the light.

“May I ask why your direwolf wears a collar and leash when none of the others do?” Wylla asked gently. “She seems much better behaved than any of the others.”

Blinking Sansa looked down at her companion and then back up at Wylla. She clamped her jaw, chewing on the inside of her cheek. Lady peered up at her, golden eyes gleaming at her.

“Your brother seemed unhappy at the idea of putting one on his Ghost,” Wylla continued, reaching out to touch a deep red rose on a tall bush as they began walking again. “Said he wasn’t a pet to tame.”

Her fingers clenched around the braided leather cord, sliding over the ribbon she had wound around it, the silk smooth and cool to the touch. Sansa had never really thought about it, Septa Mordane had suggested the collar when Lady was but a pup, showing Sansa a variety of designs and how they could be embossed with symbols of her House—or even her future husband’s.

She bit her lip and met Lady’s placid gaze as they walked. “I—to—it’s like jewelry on a lady.” The words were uncertain and she could taste the doubt on her tongue. “But why green?” Sansa asked quickly as their feet found the garden path that wound idly around the garden of which the Heart Tree was at the center.

“Have you ever heard of anyone else with green hair?” Wylla asked, giggling, slotting her arm with Sansa’s as they made their way towards the castle proper.

The ship Jon was to take to Braavos, the Golden Trident, was an impressive sight. It was the largest currently run by the Manderly’s and the sight of it made Sansa wish she was to board it. Lately, it seemed as if she was doomed to spend her entire life in the North, to have to listen to the songs of the beauty and warmth of the South never to witness the grand tourney’s, see the Great Sept of Baelor, the Red Keep . . . she wanted to see King’s Landing at sunset.

“You better come back.” Arya’s hands were wrapped tight around Jon’s shoulders, squeezing as if her life depended on it. “You’re the best teacher.”

Jon laughed, grey eyes shining as he squeezed back. “Ser Roderick is a better teacher than I . . . and I’m sure there are many, many sword masters throughout Westeros that are just as good or better than he.”

As Arya dropped back to plant her feet firmly on the ground she pursed her lips. “Maybe, but none
of them will teach a girl.”

Jon laughed and tugged a braid, leaning down to press a kiss against the top of Arya’s head. “I promise I’ll come back. Can’t let my little sister down now, can I? Not when she needs a teacher.” His eyes drifted to Sansa, the smile on his face not faltering a bit.

Before the direwolves, before the revelation of his parentage and her mother’s change in attitude... Sansa doubted such a smile would have been directed at her. Not for long or openly. She had done her best to separate herself from him, more oft than not, listening to the hissing words of those around her and wanting to please her lady mother when all her siblings grew upset at her attitude towards their half-brother.

“You must be careful,” Sansa said softly, stepping forward and handing him a simple, cloth-wrapped package. It was tied with one of the red ribbons from one of Lady’s collars, not a speck of dirt on it. “And... and make a good impression with the bankers.”

Jon took the package from her and eyed it curiously before untieing the ribbon and shifting the cloth aside to reveal the contents. It was a bar of soap from a small shop in White Harbor’s market. She had wanted to give him a gift, something to help him make a good impression in Braavos, but hadn’t been able to think of anything until Lady Leona and her daughters had taken her and her mother to browse the market wares. The shop she had picked it in advertised a variety of soaps, oils, and even cosmetics. Wylla had helped her choose this one; Sansa had gone near nose blind within half an hour of exploring the shop and its wares.

He raised an eyebrow and his lips twisted as if trying to suppress a chuckle. “I do need to, don’t I?” He nodded at her and then stepped forward tentatively. “Thank you, Sansa.”

Biting her lip, Sansa stepped forward and embraced him in a rare hug, feeling him tense with surprise. “Be careful.” She pulled back and dropped her hands, twisting them in her skirts.

“I will, I promise.”

The sun seemed to hide behind during the days following the first execution that Sansa had ever witnessed. At night, she stared at the wall of the tent she shared with Arya for hours. When she finally fell asleep, her dreams were filled with the glint of steel and red splattering of fresh blood upon bright green alfalfa and dirt. Her sister seemed to have little trouble, in comparison, at least after the first night. Arya had wandered off with her father and their wolves; Sansa had refused to acknowledge what she had witnessed in front of him.

Lady whined from the ground next to her, chin lifting up as she eyed Sansa.

“Go ahead,” she murmured with a sigh as she rolled onto her back. “I know you’re hungry.” For days Sansa had been ever more aware of her companion’s eyes as they followed Storm and Nymeria’s forms disappearing into the woods on more than one occasion. Lady had stayed at her side, ever dutiful, ever polite.

A cold nose pressed against her elbow where her arm rested above the furs of her bed. Sansa rolled her head to the side and met Lady’s eyes. Pushing herself up, Sansa gently ran her fingers over Lady’s muzzle, around her eyes, and over her ears. Running her hands through the fur around her neck, she paused over the rough leather and silk ribbons of Lady’s collar.
Lady stared at her, gold eyes glinting in the lines of light from the fire filtering in from outside the tent and the soft glow of coals in the brazier. Her fingers tensed over the collar, wrapping tightly around the leather.

Taking a deep breath, she unhooked it, pulling it away from Lady’s neck as the direwolf stood and shook out her fur.

Sansa smiled softly and leaned forward, wrapping her arms around Lady’s neck before letting go and watching as her companion slipped from the tent to join her sister and mother for a hunt in the woods and fields around them.
The patter of little feet echoed to his ears as Varys knocked a door in one of the slightly wealthier neighborhoods that butted up against Flea Bottom. He waited calmly, folding his hands in front of himself until the door clicked and slid open, just a crack. A brown eye gazed up at him before the door opened wider, a little girl with curly brown hair grinned up at him.

“Milord!” little Stasia called as she pulled the door open, her gap-toothed grin bright. Her brown hair was in a simple braid and she wore a simple dress, sleeves cut short with dirt smudged upon her arms and where the dress would fold about her knees.

“Hello, little one,” he said, smiling back as she let him into her parents’ small house. “How are you and your family faring?” Moving far enough to allow the door to close, his shoes smudged fresh dust upon recently washed stone tiles. He could make out faint floral patterns painted upon them. Nearby a bucket with rags sat.

“Mother going to work for Lady Har—Harp—,” she frowned, pressing her lips together, “for Lady Harpwood as her wetnurse when she gives birth! She said I can come with and play with her elder daughter sometimes as long as I’m good and polite.” Her little nose scrunched up, accenting a smudge of dirt upon the bridge. “I have to take a bath, though.”

“I had not heard you were an older sister, yet,” Varys said, raising an eyebrow as she grinned up at him. It was a good job, Lady Harpwood often joined the other highborn woman in attending Queen Cersei at her events. She was a gossip monger, as many ladies of the city were, but not cruel like some of King’s Landing’s nobles were to the smallfolk. It was good news, indeed, as he had put her name forth along with several others into the right ears then.

“I’m not yet,” Stasia giggled. “Mother’s huge, though, and Aunt Myriem says it won’t be more than a moon.”

“Are you looking forward to the birth?” he asked as he glanced around the small house. There were signs of wealth displayed, but none ostentatiously. Her parents spent what coin they earned on more practical expenses, a better hearth, better storage vessels for herbs, oils, and foodstuffs. They had come a long way in the twelve years since he met young Orin, then an orphan struggling to feed two younger siblings.

She nodded exuberantly. “Aunt Myriem says it will be a boy! Father is hoping for another girl, but he told me not to say anything.”

“Would you like a little brother or a sister?”

“Hylda says having a little sister is best because it’s like having a living doll to dress,” she made a face, “but I think I want a little brother.”

“Oh?” Varys asked, folding his hands in front of him as he watched her.

“When he grows up he could be a knight and protect me from bad men like Hylda’s older brother at the Silver Slipper guards her sisters.” Ah, Hylda, another one of his little birds. Her older sisters were employed at one of the few brothel’s frequented by noblemen that wasn’t under Littlefinger’s thumb. He would have to check in soon with her as well. Hylda herself was more interested in being a nanny or a midwife and at six name days, she had plenty of time to one day realize that goal.
“A noble undertaking, for sure . . . Stasia, did your father leave anything for me when he was last home?” he asked softly, crouching down to her height.

Her little face twisted in thought and then she nodded, scampering over to a wooden bookshelf. It was covered with pots and baskets, along with a few odds and ends. Picking up a wicker basket, she returned, holding it out to him.

“Thank you,” he said, taking it in hand and standing. He opened it to remove the half dozen letters ensconced within. “Did he give any indication when he would next return.”

“He said he was going to Pentos and then Braavos,” she said with a point, “he left yesterday so . . . he’ll be gone for my name day and maybe the birth.”

A quick mental calculation had him nodding. “I am sorry to hear that he will miss your name day,” he said as he slipped the letters into his pocket. He retrieved a note and a little bag. “Give this to your father when he comes home and this is for you.”

She took both, and the basket, setting the basket onto the ground and slipping the note inside. It took a moment but Stasia was able to open the little cloth bag. She squealed with delight. “Cherries!” She smiled up at him. “Thank you, milord!”

He patted her head gently, ruffling her hair and bid her farewell. The note for her father, one of his long loyal birds, listed a number of possible, high lucrative, trade opportunities for the upcoming harvests in various regions. The cherries were for her, a little token of apology that her father would be away in part because of errands he directed.

Stasia was a sweet girl and had the potential to be a great source of information, especially if she followed her mother in frequenting Lady Harpwood’s household.

As he returned home, the letters a heavy weight in his pocket, Varys kept his eyes peeled for any of his other birds that might seek his attention with news. He had so many plans afoot now that he worried he one day may start losing the details as he aged. So far, however, his mind had remained sharp, easily keeping track of each and every action he took and the obstacles that fell in his way.

Things were moving swiftly now as the central pieces in his plans grew older. They didn’t always behave in the ways he anticipated, but he did his best to bend and adapt, allowing the ripples created to form into new avenues that would help his cause.

Recently the ripples had grown larger, emanating out of an unexpected source: The North. Varys was lucky that his little birds and the birds—even some of his mice remained loyal—that had grown up over his years in Westeros were spread so far over two continents and beyond. Sometimes he wasn’t even sure if he knew how far his network ranged, occasionally hearing twitters from birds long thought grown and lost. If he didn’t have those contacts, then he might not have been able to adjust accordingly.

Have them he did, however, and sung they did for him, remembering all that he had done for them. Some people might say they owed him debts, but he never saw it as such, not truly. Everything he did was for the good of the realm, for the people, for the world. Perhaps, in some ways, for himself, but he would gladly give his life if it meant the world was a better place. As yet, Varys saw no indication that the end of his life would help anyone but those that would see the world burn.
Interlude: Varys Part II

Chapter Summary

WARNING: This chapter is a flashback to Varys' childhood and a peek at what happened to him. Nothing too graphic.

The streets had long been his home in one manner or another. The mummer's show he traveled with may have been rich enough to travel great distances, flitting from one free city to another and even to King's Landing once, which was one reason Varys chose to stay on with them, but he was still an orphan, a child, and that was something that was oft taken advantage of by the man who held the purse. He didn't much mind the loss of his share, however, for even at a young age Varys knew there were more important things than coin.

Knowledge was his currency. The languages and dialects, customs, history . . . it all fascinated him and he absorbed it. He listened and mimicked, pranced about in the shadows of nobles, merchants, drunks, and whores. By the time he was old enough to join the main show on stage, Varys had the gait of a drunken sell sword down and could mimic the accent of near a dozen dialects of Valyrian perfectly and was able to speak six languages near fluently not counting his birth tongue.

He had grown comfortable in his circumstances, in his ability to slide through the shadows and blend into the background in near any city he and his fellows visited. His clothes were on the edge between nice enough to be seen in most streets of any city and dirty enough to allow him to blend into even the darkest corners of King's Landing's Flea Bottom should he have chosen. It was not out of the ordinary for him to slip away from his fellow mummers and explore. Not a one batted an eye as he slipped off, if they even noticed, and not a one would find his absence concerning.

Their show had been doing well since its arrival in Myr, the stories that Khyndar had developed telling a tale that catered specifically to the cities culture. Myr was a bastion of the arts and it seemed as if every tavern Varys visited held men, and the occasional woman, who knew things he had never heard of. While he wasn't interested in a trade himself, the artisans that trained here were among the finest in the world. The craft of several showed in the new stage upon which he performed near-nightly along with the props and costumes they'd bought from a group of apprentices, collars still sturdy around their necks, not a frayed edge or bit of tarnish in sight.

It was, perhaps, his complacency that did him in. No city was the same and Varys had always known to avoid slavers, but never had thought to keep such a close eye on a man whose intellectual prowess was in the middle of spilling out information. Knowledge of magic at his feet. Varys had, of course, seen wizards, shadow binders, and others that claimed power before, but it had never been something he thought to protect himself from. They were few and far between and their simple tricks seemed little more than that, something to amuse an audience and swindle some coin.

He should have been more careful.

His world was a mash of colors, noise hummed in the background as things swam into view, he
blinked his eyes and stared up at a stone ceiling. He could see tiles, glistening in little flickers from the firelight. His jaw ached more than the pounding in his head, rough linen bit at his cheeks and pressed against his tongue. He could hear voices, but the words were difficult to make out. His brain was unable to focus on them to decipher the language they were speaking as the cadences dipped and peaked.

A hand slid over his forehead and fingered his hair. It had been months since he'd had it shorn, the silky silver-gold strands spilled over pale fingers.

"Are you sure about this one?"

"Yes."

There was a pause and the hand withdrew, disappearing as Varys tried to follow the movement with his eyes. In his bodies addled and foggy state he tried to move his head and torso along with them, sluggish as they were. Rope bit into his shoulders and across his chest, causing him to freeze. He was naked as a newborn, tied upon a stone table, he could tell from the texture of the surface below him, for all that it had warmed from the touch of his body.

"If you are sure," the man said as he walked around Varys, picking several items up from what he assumed was a table just out of his line of sight.

"I am."

When the man returned to his line of sight, brown eyes meeting his, Varys stared at him, wide-eyed. Then the man began the ritual and Varys began his futile attempts to move away, escape, fight, anything. His body was barely responding as is, drugged with some sort of potion he was sure. The man began to chant and, while Varys may not have known what the words meant, he knew that nothing good would come of magic. Especially not magic that had him bound and gagged, naked, and splayed out like a sacrifice to the gods.

Human sacrifice wasn't common, but it also wasn't unheard of. There were a lot of temples in Myr; he had yet to explore very many of them.

It seemed like an eternity as he struggled futilely as the man chanted and painted his body with herbs and oil and substances that Varys couldn't see but also didn't want to. He'd been spared no dignity, near every inch of his body was touched and painted and it left him wishing he could just disappear, fade into the shadows and hide from the world for eternity.

Perhaps it was why he thought little of the touch at first. It was no different from other touches the man had done over the course of his little ritual.

He thought little of it until suddenly it was all Varys could think of.

His world had turned into a firestorm of pain.

The dagger paused above his heart, words chanting overhead a pulse of sound that was unable to pierce the sharp, overwhelming pain emanating from his lower body. His mind warred with “no” and “yes” wanting both to live and yet seeking an end to the sharp, searing pain that had overwhelmed him. He stare-wide-eyed at the glinting, rippled shine of the dagger.
“Stop.” The woman who’d been watching, hidden behind a crimson veil since he’d been dragged into the room, spoke, her voice silky smooth yet husky.

His eyes darted in her direction, his body quaking minutely and sweating from the pain. Chills swept through him alternating with warm spikes of pain. The stone beneath him was soaked with his own bodily fluids, further chilling him as they cooled. Sweat, blood . . . others he didn’t want to think of.

She stepped around the large brazier that the sorcerer had tossed his manhood into after draining it dry of blood. Varys had been forced to watch the entire ordeal, barely able to move and unable to speak thanks to the gag and potion the man had certainly forced upon him.

The woman strode closer, stopping just above his head, peering down at him from behind a haze of crimson lace. He could make out nothing of her, everything clothed in dark colors, except for her hands, wrinkled and splotched with age.

Reaching out, she touched his sweat damped forehead and then cupped his cheek, forcing his face to turn to her as she leaned over him. She tilted her head as she surveyed him and he stared where he assumed her eyes were, hidden behind the red veil.

“Tend his wounds,” she ordered suddenly, not even looking up as the man who had maimed him made a startled, strangled noise. “Then release him to the streets.”

“But—”

She tilted her face up and he caught sight of the pale, thin skin, the color of bone, beneath the veil. The man quieted and he heard the twang of the dagger being dropped upon stone before the man moved away.

Her voice sounded much younger than she was. He could do nothing but stare as she leaned over him, the only thing he was able to make out between the haze of pain and the lace of her veil was dark eyes and her puff of breath against the fabric.

“There is much yet for you in this life, boy,” she murmured softly and he strained to hear her as she stroked his cheek. He tried to patch the words together, to understand. “You’ll serve many crowns. But few will lead the world to light. With dragons . . . you’ll earn renown. With dragons . . . you may fall. Their fate is entwined with your own.” She tilted her head. “A crown of Earth, Iron, Gold . . . they’re the legacy that will see the world blossom you tend it.”

He caught her words, most of them anyway, perhaps he missed a few through the pain.

She drew away from him, standing as he felt something burn. Varys would have screamed if he could. He certainly tried to. The pain whited out his world for a few moments.

When he came back to himself he heard her voice again, “Live, boy. Live and serve. If you do, you’ll earn your greatest desire.”

He let his eyes fall shut and heard her speaking with the sorcerer.

“The potion, milady, there’s only enough for—”

“There’s plenty.”

“Only for one,” he said, politeness attempting to mask annoyance. “I have other buyers.”
“You’ll receive your gold.” She paused for a long moment and he heard the light tinkling of glass vials. "Once the boy is well enough and free,” she told him, voice calm but demanding, “you’ll receive all that you would have and more.”
His rooms were warm and airy; a brazier, recently lit, burned brightly near his desk as he entered, crossing the tile floor to the plain wooden centerpiece of the sparsely decorated room. The maid that served him, a sweet young woman with a burn discoloring half her cheek and down the left side of her neck smiled at him.

“My lord,” she said, “would you like me to retrieve something from the kitchens to break your fast?”

“Jorja,” he said with a sigh, “I am not a lord, as I have often said. Must I continue to remind you?” He raised an eyebrow, glancing at her before focusing on the pile of correspondence that had appeared while he was away. Another of his little birds, a servant in the kitchens, must have delivered them along with the fresh-baked bread visibly cooling near a jug of water.

She smiled at him placatingly at the oft-spoken words and tilted her he

“Yes,” Varys said as he pulled his chair out from his desk and sat down. It took mere moments for him to unlock the hidden space in the top drawer of his desk. “Some fresh fruit would be nice. And do take this with you,” he held a sealed letter out to her, "do thank Alciodae for the sweet bread, for me dear."

"Of course," Jorja nodded at him as she took it, her discolored hand, scared hand slipping it into a pocket. She moved to leave before quirking another smile at him over her shoulder, "my lord."

Varys sighed and turned back to his desk, glancing down at the seals on the letters before him. None of them were visibly important, at least not as the ones he carried on his person. He listened as she left, waiting until she had shut the door to his rooms before pulling each of the scrolls out of his robes.

They were all sealed with various crests upon them, except for two where the writer had used a dab of candle wax and flattened it with a blade or other object. Each brought news from cities across the narrow seas, contacts that Stasia’s father met with. He set aside the letters from Illyrio and Ser Jorah, each updating him on the spiral of behavior Prince Viserys had fallen into and the wedding of Daenerys to Khal Drogo. It was much worse than it had been years previously and increasingly disconcerting.

He pursed his lips and sighed as he read the prince had decided to follow his sister rather than remain at Illyrio’s manse in Pentos. The niggling at the back of his mind was crawling for more attention. This news, along with the news of the dragon in the North, had spurned their plans and plots in unexpected directions.

Up until a couple years ago, he’d assumed that the bastard boy in the North, dragon or not, would go to the Wall and live his days fighting wildlings and protecting the realm. That he would die childless, a black brother, perhaps elevating himself to an officer position within the Watch. Everything had pointed in that direction. Varys had put the question of parentage from his mind and focused on the three red dragons he was sure of. A bastard, after all, wouldn’t be a red dragon, but a black. Or, if Lord Eddard had earned a blemish on his honor like much of the realm believed he was simply a white wolf. If all else failed there would also have been the chance of securing an heir as many of the brothers frequented nearby brothel towns. A young man would be hard-pressed to resist at least a few trips to wet his cock, given the chance. The current Lord Commander had no qualms about allowing the activities of his men, few did, the whores either took moon tea or any
boy child born tended to join the ranks along the Wall for better prospects.

Varrys had always thought the boy was likely Rhaegar’s, but the prince hadn’t trusted him. King Aerys had, after all, been the one to bring Varys into the fold and chose to confide in him even when willfully ignoring the words of his family and old friends. Rhaegar towards the end had been plotting and sharing information with Varys would have been a risky endeavor. So the prince had actively sought to go behind his back and hid information. The tourney of Harrenhal was one such act that the man had tried, and failed, to keep from him. Sometimes, Varys wished he’d not learned of it and whispered into the King’s ear. Perhaps things would be simpler now had the lords made their deals and usurped Aerys in favor of Rhaegar. The Targaryen prince would have been a better ruler than the one they had now.

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. Varys’ surety of the Snow’s parentage and legal status had been shattered swiftly in the past year. Whispers spread of a dragon, living and growing larger by the moon in the North spread and a single twitter reached his ear from one particular little bird he’d earned the loyalty of during the days of King Aerys reign. Doubting himself wasn’t something Varys found himself doing often. In this case, however, a tiny nugget had grown into a tumbling boulder and he’d set more plans into motion.

If the North had a dragon, they would need the North on their side . . . or the dragon itself on theirs.

The fourth letter, one sealed with wax and the side of a blade, confirmed the arrival of the Northern wolf in Volantis and his meeting with the King. It also confirmed for him, in terse, disbelieving, coded annoyance that beneath the white wolf’s fur lay the red scales of a dragon. Not the black he would have preferred.

He rubbed his fingers across his brow and sighed. After perusing the letter twice more he dropped it into the brazier, watching as it turned to ash. He would compose a response soon enough, the next ship setting sail to Volantis wouldn't depart for another two days.

The clash of practice swords in the courtyard below echoed slightly, making it seem as if the dance of blades below was moving at a much faster pace than it truly was. Varys paused on the walkway, straightening his shoulders as his eyes found the spar occurring between the crown prince and his current teacher.

It wasn’t that the prince was untalented, perhaps he could become quite skilled if he put his mind to it, but spending his hours practicing was not something young Joffrey was interested in. While blades weren’t Varys’ specialty, he could tell that the prince let his annoyance with the situation, and his sparring partner, shine through in every movement. The boy expected those he fought to bow before him and his golden mane, to let him win. A byproduct of his mother’s spoiling, perhaps, or just a personality trait. It was hard to say at his young age.

A quick movement on the part of the swordmaster had the prince disarmed and within seconds the boy was shrieking, his deepening voice squeaking at the ends of words. Varys’ cheek flinched in a slight wince as he watched the spectacle. The trainer, for his part, took it in stride, even when threats were called out.

The heir may not be much of a fighter, but there was enough potential should he work at it that he could have been good. If he were to let go of his royal ego. It was a shame, his father was an excellent swordsman.
“I see the prince still has no companions of an age to test his mettle against,” a slick drawl slithered into his ear.

Varys cast a look to the side. “I do believe the prince has yet to graduate beyond his wooden practice sword, my lord.”

“It must be hard for him, facing only grown men,” Lord Petyr Baelish said, coming to stand next to Varys.

“I am surprised that you missed Lord Lakemoor’s heir,” Varys raised an eyebrow, turning back to watch as the prince stalked away, hands fisted at his sides. “He visited for a sennight several moons ago. He left rather sooner than planned, from what I hear.” The boy had been the son of a rising House in the Westerlands, hoping to gain favor with the crown. He’d trained beside the prince thrice, sparring twice, and left soon after they met for the second time in the training ring.

“Ah, yes, young Lord Michele. Quite a comely lad, if I remember the maid’s gossip correctly.” Peter Baelish turned to face him as the prince’s trainer bent to pick up the discarded equipment. It was very likely there would be a new trainer on the morrow. “He’s quite skilled with the sword, I hear. Did his uncle not win a tourney in Lannisport last year?”

“That he did,” Varys acknowledged as they turned and began to walk towards the small council chamber. The weasel fell into step with him. “A minor tourney, to be sure, but decently attended by the lords and ladies of the Westerlands. I believe it was the wedding of Lord Tywin’s second or third cousin to one of Lord Frey’s daughters.”

“Third cousin, I believe.” Baelish’s lip quirked up on the right side. There was a lull in conversation as they passed a servant girl replacing a recently cleaned tapestry depicting the battle at the Trident. Varys’ eyes caught on the armor-clad form of Prince Rhaegar’s near hidden beneath the waves as King Robert stood victoriously, his warhammer raised high. “I’ve heard some odd rumblings from the North recently.”

“Rumblings?” Varys suppressed his smile as the man finally got to the point of the conversation. “Have your whores grown tired of summer snows and rough tongued Northmen?”

Baelish’s steps barely faltered, but they did. The man had spies across the realm, but Varys’ birds spoke of whore houses closing in the North, the women and men employed finding their way to establishments in the South. Littlefinger relied heavily on his dens of inequity, giving his ear to the tongues of men and woman he practically owned. People who sold their bodies daily for coin.

While he wasn’t above using whores for spies, he was wary of them. The reliability of those that sold themselves was questionable and costlier. He found they were often easily swayed by promises of riches. Selfish creatures that served their own self-interests even as they pleased those around them. Baelish surrounded himself by those who saw nothing in their futures but more of the same. When Varys dealt with them, he sought out those with goals. Those that wanted more for their families, not just in the monetary sense.

Baelish chuckled breathily, a smile bright and tooth baring slid onto his face. “No, just talk of construction of a cost that most Northmen would balk at. Ports tell of spending that has more than tripled, both for manpower and supplies. As Master of Coin, this has me concerned that the reports Lord Arryn and I receive are not entirely accurate.”

“I did hear that Lord Stark sent one of his sons to negotiate a loan with the Iron Bank for the coming winter,” Varys said. “Rumor is that it will be the worst and longest winter in a thousand years.”
“Yes,” Baelish practically scoffed, “but the work began two years ago, or more. The Lord’s bastard didn’t arrive in Braavos until perhaps four moons ago. Quite a disparity.” He glanced at Varys, his grey-green eyes narrowed. “One usually takes a loan before breaking ground.”

Inclining his head Varys ‘hmmed. “The northern lords tend not to spend their gold on frivolities as many southerners do. Winters are, after all, much harsher north of the neck. It would not surprise me if most, if not all, of the major Houses of the North held a portion of a year’s profits aside in preparation.”

“Most are very frugal,” Baelish acknowledged, shifting the books he held.

“And much of the South looks down upon them for it.”

“Simple-minded savages.” Baelish nodded as they passed a guard stationed down the hall from the chamber’s open doors. “That is the view most southerners have of them.”

Is it yours? Varys wondered. The mockingbird had a history with the North, the Starks in particular, after all. He wasn’t shy in showing his dislike for them, only tempering it slightly, in his dealings as Master of Coin. On more than one occasion he had suggested increasing taxes upon northern harbors or trade caravans traveling into the southern kingdoms in that sly way of his. His manner of convincing others to do what he wanted with mild suggestions, insinuating thoughts into their minds, worked in many places and on many people. Luckily Lord Arryn, Lord Stannis, and the other members of the small council were not quick to fall to his machinations. They, and even King Robert, when he deigned to show up, were quick to shoot down the increases, citing the damage such a tax would do when considering the already small margins of profit—at least compared to other port cities and kingdoms—the North made with their exports.

That was, at least, until less than a year ago, when the North began to export various minerals and gems along with an increase in logging and output of certain, harder crops. Many of the new exports were byproducts of mining operations that had cropped up or increased as materials for new construction got underway. One little bird had whispered in his ear that a diamond mind had been found when cutting stone at the edge of the mountains to the west of the New Gift for the expansion of Queenscrown. He could only imagine the profit that could befall the lord whose land it lay upon. He knew the King had authorized Lord Stark to parcel the land to lord’s willing to settle if they supported the Night’s Watch with a special tax. It was long overdue, Varys had long heard that few populated the land anymore and the Night’s Watch itself had dwindled drastically in the past few generations.

Lord Arryn was the only one in the small council chambers when they arrived. He was sitting at the head of the table, flipping through a stack of papers. Slight creases in them told of their origination of letters, likely reports sent from each of wardens. He glanced up at them, eyes lingering on Baelish for a moment, before returning to his perusal.

Since his return from Moat Cailin without his lady wife and heir, Jon Arryn’s demeanor had shifted. He acted with more caution, his trust harder to come by than in previous years. His own wife seemed to have lost any she might have had, not that he could blame the aging lord. Varys heard whispers that Lady Lysa Arryn was sequestered in Riverrun; rumors that were quite unflattering towards the Lady of the Vale. Whispers of her protesting screeches as she met with her lord father and his response had been relatively easy to come by. At the same time news of Lord Hoster Tully hosting banquets to force a betrothal upon his son and heir, Edmure, had also reached King's Landing, spurring a few ladies of the court to depart for Riverrun.

As they settled into their respective seats, Baelish spoke, “Should we expect his grace to attend on this fine day?”
“Unlikely,” Lord Arryn replied shortly, not even looking up as he stared at the papers in front of him, lips curled into a slight frown. Once the man had humored Littlefinger, treated him almost as a son, but now he seemed to lack much of the patience he once did.

“I believe his grace is currently hunting a boar with our Master of Laws and several childhood acquaintances from the Stormlands,” Varys informed, voice light as he settled back in his seat. “They were quite jubilant in their preparations this morning. I am surprised you didn’t hear them.”

“I was busy, attending to my duties,” Baelish said, voice tight. “Did Lord Stannis see fit to join his brothers?”

“Lord Stannis left for Dragonstone late last night,” Lord Arryn was the one to answer, glancing up at them. Varys couldn’t decide if the circles under his eyes were better or worse now that his lady wife was absent from his daily routine. Better, perhaps. “He will be gone for at least a fortnight. His castellan requested his presence to sort out issues with the mines.”

“The obsidian mines?” Varys ventured. The Lord of Dragonstone had been meeting often with Lord Arryn recently. Whispers were difficult to come by of their meetings, both were keeping their secrets close to heart.

“Yes. Apparently, there have been some issues in arranging transportation to East Watch and disagreements regarding wages.” Lord Arryn glanced his way. "He also plans to go over the status of the fleet with his lord's."

Ah, yes. The fleet. The lord's that owed fealty to Stannis still, even after a decade and a half, bucked under his rule. Reports of high numbers of vessels being used as merchant ships instead of standing in reserve were not uncommon. But there were other, more pressing, reasons for Lord Stannis to be returning to his seat. Varys had noticed the changes that were slowly and quietly being implemented around the Red Keep. More of Renly and Stannis’ bannermen had been visiting as of late—even a few of the silver-haired or violet-eyed noblemen from Dragonstone and it's surrounding territory, much to the King’s vocal dislike—and with them, they brought knights and household guards. When they left, a few remained, lessening the disparate ratio of lions to stags.

“A shame,” Lord Baelish said. “I was hoping to garner his opinion on the buildup of Northern merchant ships. I think,” he paused, glancing between them as Grand Maester Pycelle wandered in, “it may be time to revisit the idea of increasing the export tax on Northern ports.”

Varys barely held back a wince as the maester passed behind him, the stench of musk and wine barely hidden behind the odor of spiced soap and incense. The man was moving slowly, as usual, body held taught. He kept himself from pressing his lips taught as the man sat and grumbled near nonsensically a greeting. Their eyes met for a moment before Pycelle darted his away to adjust his chain.

“I believe we’ve discussed this matter, Lord Baelish,” Lord Arryn turned to him, lips pressed in a thin line. “At this time, such an increase would do nothing to help and only hinder Northern trade. If the maester’s are right they will need the increased trade to make it through the winter to come.”

“Surely a small increase would have—”

“The coming winter is, by . . . by all calculations, going to be a long one,” Maester Pycelle interrupted the slick creature. “Some say ten years. If such comes to pass the North will certainly need assistance from the South to make it through the harsh snows.” He coughed a bit, clearing his throat. "Few crops grow outside of glasshouses and ten years of relying on those?” He chuckled, grinning with amusement towards the Keeper of Coin. “You’ll get your gold come winter when
they start importing." He nodded and paused. "Raise taxes on the imports from the other kingdoms then. When the snow piles up they’ll be begging from the Reach, Riverlands, Westerlands . . . anywhere they can for aid. No House can support themselves and their small folk through even a five-year winter in the North.”

Varys eyed the man with slight surprise, he would have thought the man would side with Lord Baelish, his loyalty tending to sway towards the Lannisters. Increased taxes on northern trade, hindering it, would only help the cause of other regions. His words did ring true, however, as the North did import more food when winter came. However, they were also considered a hardier people and the population of the North was more spread out than the other kingdoms. Thinking of the construction projects, increased farming, and shipments of glass being procured by traders through White Harbor, he wondered exactly how well prepared the North would be for the coming winter.

If his little birds were correct . . . perhaps the North might be more prepared than anyone else.
"Septa," young Griff began as he leaned back on the stool he was sitting upon, his hair pulled back behind him as her hands massaged the paste into his hair, “why does my hair have to be blue?” He hated this, the process more than the color. Every other month, occasionally more often, the septa, Haldon, or his father sat him upon this very stool and worked the dye into his hair, forcing him to sit with the smelly, sticky concoction for hours before it’d be rinsed out to reveal the unnatural dye again.

She smiled at him, violet eyes peering down at him from where she leaned towards him. Her long dark waves were pinned back to keep it out of her face and away from the blue dye they’d procured recently off yet another trader from Lys. As she worked he dye into the scalp she dropped her eyes to where her fingers were painted themselves. It would be several days before they’d be clean again.

“Septa?” his brow furrowed as he peered up at her.

“Your mother.” Her smile was sad, which confused him because, as far as he knew Lemore had never known his mother. He himself had never known his mother. “You, and your father, both dye your hair blue to honor your mother . . . who hailed from Lys.”

“But,” he paused, biting his lip, “I get my true color from her, do I not?”

She disappeared from his view and ‘hmmed softly as she gathered more dye. “Perhaps,” Lemore told him, voice faint, “but for now, you and your father honor her memory in this way.”

“But it itches!” he protested with a huff.

The septa giggled, appearing within his view again, lips twisted as held back a louder laugh. “We’ll be done soon,” she said as she finished working the dye into the ends of his long strands. “Just need to let it set and then perhaps your father will take you for a swim.”

Excitement bubbled up and he grinned, toes curling and fingers twisting on his seat. Father rarely allowed him to swim, claimed it was too dangerous for one as small as he. Of the found himself eying the children that followed their mothers to the river’s edge as they washed clothes and performed other chores. They were free to splash about, search for clams, turtles, and chase little minnows in the shallows.

Griff spent his days listening to lectures from the septa or Haldon, trying to catch glimpses of the fun over the high railing of the ship or through the little windows in the cabins. He was jealous of them, their freedom, and the families he spied. He oft wished he had a companion his own, a brother or sister to keep him company, but his mother died before his memory and he was the first
of many intended. Or so he liked to believe.

“In the Rhoyne?” young Griff asked.

“In the Rhoyne,” his father confirmed and Griff tilted his head straight as his father entered the cabin, moving to stand in front of him. His own hair was in the process of being darkened by the very dye that slicked Griff’s strands.

Grinning, young Griff peered up at his father, feet swinging in front of him with excitement, barely brushing the floor. “Truly?”

“Truly,” his father nodded, smiling wider. “As soon as the dye has set.”

The sky was just beginning to lighten, grey giving way to splashes of pinks, yellows, rusted red and orange as Aegon's eyes slit fully open and he shifted upright. The light, cotton sheets he slept among pooled at his waist, giving view to lean, defined muscles that spoke of daily physical activity—swordplay with Ser Rolly or Jon. For every hour he spent at Haldon or Septa Lemore’s side learning, he spent two on his feet studying skills he saw as more essential to his plight.

The entire day and evening he had felt restless; once slipping into bed in the cabin he shared with his foster father, Aegon had gotten little sleep, tossing and turning with strange dreams flitting through his mind. The feeling that his world was too small, skin itching to be released from the confines of his world, and his voice stuck in his throat. They had hounded him since the sun had arched its way across the sky the day previous.

He let out a long breath, hearing it hiss into the silence of the room. The only sound was the lap of water against the hull beneath the open window, distant calls of river birds, and the light crackle-hiss of the flames in the brazier. It set feet from his bed, as far as it could be from Jon’s. Aegon tolerated the heat much better than the old lord.

Shifting, Aegon pushed the sheets aside and settled his feet on the polished wood floor. It was pleasantly cool, yet just right. As quietly as he could—Jon was sleeping on his side, facing the window—he slipped across the small distance to the wrought iron brazier and curled his fingers over the edge. The dragon egg, black as the darkest night with accents of gold and shimmers of red and orange, set in the middle of the coals, tiny flames licking at it but mostly kept heated by the warmth sustained by the glowing embers and coal.

It shifted the moment he laid eyes upon it, opposite the way the Shy Maid rocked, and then tilted again, shaking lightly. His lips parted and eyes widened.

Reaching out, Aegon gently wrapped his long fingers about it, picking it up and holding it in front of his face. As he did the side dented out, cracks forming as it was pushed out from the inside. He stepped back, once, twice, and then let himself drop to the floor, kneeling. The egg burned at his pants when he settled it upon his knees, darkening the fabric in places but not setting it alight.

He heard his foster father’s bed shift behind him, his name called distantly, but ignored everything but the growing cracks in the now dull shell that was falling apart before his very eyes. His brother had told him of this moment, the moment his Winter entered the world, but it had been difficult to believe the magnificent dragon, bigger than some of the smallfolk’s fishing vessels that traveled the Rhoyne could ever have come from such a small egg.
Letting out another breath, Aegon watched as the largest crack split the egg and out of it pressed a shining black muzzle, slick and messy with the fluid of its birth. Within moments a wing pressed forward and the claws at the top curled around, cracking it further.

Aegon shifted his hands, curling his thumbs just below the little black muzzle into a crack that had formed and pulled the shell apart further. The little dragon tumbled into his lap, muzzle pressing against the top of his left thigh, tail curling over the edge of his right.

He was so small.

Carefully, he helped the little creature free itself of bits of shell, dropping it to the floor near his side. Aegon’s fingers danced over the drying scales, caressing the slight gold accents above its muddy brown eyes, lightly drifting over wings that tinted burnt red and orange.

Aegon couldn’t help the smile that spread across his features as the little dragon leaned into his touch, letting out little chuff-hiss-purrs and nipping at the pads of his fingers. The presence was warm, content, and fierce in his mind. Within moments it hopped up, swishing its tail as it tried to find its balance, wings unfolding flapping lightly. Even as it toppled—caught quickly by Aegon’s quick hands—he could feel the determination burning in its little eyes.

“By the seven,” Jon’s voice whispered behind him, a solid presence at his back.

Aegon held his hand out, letting the little dragon brush his head against it. Quiet purr-chuffs drifted to his ears and he trailed his fingers down its back, feeling the tiny muscles shift under hardening scales. He marveled over the little creature, so delicate looking and yet fierce. One day it would be the size of the ship they now rested upon.

As his fingers gentled over the hardening scales and his eyes took in the little details, Aegon felt his mind searching. His brother had told him, one night after they had spent hours swimming in the river currents—Jaehaerys having to reteach his body the nuances of swimming in a moving river as swift as the Rhoyne—of his dragon’s naming. They had spoken of it quietly.

“How did you know what to call her?” Aegon had asked quietly as they let the setting sun dry their skin. “How did you know she was . . . a she?”

Jaehaerys had smiled that small, serious slant of his lips that sometimes got on Aegon’s nerves. His brother knew so much, and yet sometimes nothing at all. “I just did,” he’d responded finally, the northern accent thicker than usual after long hours of exercise. It always was when he was tired or relaxed after a long day. “It seemed right. As if it was meant to be.”

Aegon hadn’t understood then, but he did now. There was something shifting at the back of his mind, ever so slightly. Not like the warging ability Jaehaerys had described, but something. He ran his fingers over the crown of his dragon’s head and pressed it between two tiny nostrils, feeling a puff of warm air against his fingertips.

“Hello, Meriax,” he said finally, grin widening as the little creature nipped at his fingers, approval glowing as he dug little claws into Aegon’s pants to keep its balance. “I hope you are ready, my friend. We have a lot to do.”
The name Meriax is a double tribute. It's a mix of Meraxes and Princess Meria.
Interlude: Aegon Part II

Laughing, Aegon leaned back against the outside wall of the cabin, watching as Duck traded blows with Jaehaerys—Jon—Aegon’s newfound little brother. The weighted practice swords swirled through the air and clacked against each other. The dark-haired boy that claimed to be Targaryen was very, very good. He claimed to favor his mother’s looks and Septa Lemore and even his foster father Jon begrudgingly confirmed. He embodied the Stark look, the look of the North.

Jaehaerys had thick dark hair, that curled into tight waves, and grey eyes that shone with emotion only with the young man let them. In the right light, Aegon thought he might see dark wine-colored flecks hidden within the grey sometimes. It was less than a sennight ago that he had ignored Jon’s words and followed him onto the deck mere minutes after he had disappeared onto the deck, leaving Aegon to his studies.

Aegon had known that they were meeting someone in Volantis; Jon had never bothered to hide or lie to him about their reason for traveling down the Rhoyne earlier than previously intended. They’d received word from Illyrio, the grumpy, fat, cheese merchant whose words were silk and deeds as good as gold. His eyes were always dark, however, when they eyed Aegon, full of regret and dismay. Aegon had never been able to discern why, for all anyone ever seemed to do was praise him and his accomplishments. His burgeoning knowledge, the rhetoric he studied, he memorized, and he trained, putting his whole being into becoming the king everyone expected him to be. Even the cheesemonger. Even then, however, their words of praise often drifted back to blood. As if Aegon’s ancestry was worth more than all the gold in Essos.

Still, none of them had known exactly who they were meeting. Illyrio’s letters had not been that precise—lest they be snatched by spies. Jon had assumed it to be a contact, someone to help bring coin or soldiers to their side for the battles to come. There hadn’t been an inkling that the meeting would result in what it had.

Jon had asked him to stay in the cabin as he met with the men the Spider had sent, but curiosity had got the better of him and, Aegon hazarded, it was probably for the best. He had slipped onto the deck in time to see Jon in a heated discussion with a boy a tad younger than he, mere moments before the boy had paced forward and slipped his hand into the lantern, holding it within and letting the flame dance upon his skin.

Shock had coursed through Aegon’s veins, followed by confusion and a strange sort of longing. A longing for family, for blood. Growing up he had known of Viserys and Daenerys but never had he laid eyes upon them, let alone met them. The closest thing to family he had known were Griff and Septa Lemore, who had raised him. He’d called them both father or mother at some point in his childhood. The Septa only until she could make him truly understand her role as caregiver, teacher, and nursemaid, and Griff until Aegon was told the truth at ten.

Aegon had thought, believed, anyone of close blood to him was dead or out of reach. To have an unknown half-brother show up, proof of his identity in his blood, the sight of his dragon, and documents on hand . . . it had been almost as shocking as the aid he brought with him. Pretty words, promises, knowledge, and proof of funds to aid in the reclaiming of the throne that had been stolen from their House.

It was too good to be true and yet it was true.

“He’s good,” Haldon said, appearing at his side, leaning against the painted wood. “Very skilled,
precise with his blows and his footwork. In a few years, he may have the strength to best most challengers."

"Is he better than me?" Aegon asked, slanting a look at the man.

Haldon’s lips quirked a little and he met Aegon’s gaze. “Perhaps. You certainly were well matched. Jaehaerys has spent his life training with his uncle’s men, after all, and you with your tutors. He’s had more swords to test his mettle against than you have had chance to.”

Many more, Aegon thought as he turned his attention back to the spar happening mere yards away. It was hard to believe, the words Jaehaerys had spoken, but he knew things that no one else did. Thoughts, dreams, goals, moments that he had kept to himself. He knew of the curly-haired girl Aegon had first kissed at two and ten, having slipped away in a market one evening during a festival celebrating some local harvest deity or another. She had been sweet and he hadn’t known her name, but her hair had been thick, inky black, skin a dark tan, and eyes as green as emeralds. He knew of girl with dark hair and even darker freckles and eyes the color of amber he’d bedded when he slipped his guard at three and ten on the banks of a tributary of the Rhoyne far from here.

The lectures he received upon running into Haldon an hour later, after the first event, and then Jon after the second had been enough cause to keep his mouth shut. He had, perhaps, mentioned a cute girl and maybe her sweet lips, but not her eyes or her name. Jaehaerys had known both their names and had described the moments in the same manner Aegon might have, had he thought to share it.

More though, he had spoken of Aegon’s doubts, his wishes, the plans he hoped to implement given a chance, should he manage to secure the Iron throne. There was so much that he wanted to do, but foremost he wanted to be less like his grandfather and more the king his father could have—should have been. He wished his reign not to be marred with madness, but for future generations to look up at him as a just and wise ruler. It would, Jaehaerys had whispered, be an uphill battle coming as a conqueror, but it wasn’t impossible.

A sword clattered to the ground and Duck stared at Jaehaerys, both of them breathing hard, the younger man’s sword slanted to his gut. Jaehaerys’ breathes came in ragged pants, his dark hair stuck to his scalp and neck. He was shorter than Aegon, but their build was of a similar likeness. Their father’s build, Aegon knew. Jaehaerys knew how to use his build and height to his advantage. He was quick, surefooted, and confident in his abilities. He moved with a confidence that Aegon hoped he could one day emulate.

Aegon smiled and clapped, earning a glare from Ser Rolly who had stepped away from Jaehaerys’ sword and moved to retrieve his own.

“He would make a good Kingsguard,” Haldon murmured idly tapping his fingers along his forearm, “and if he swore himself to your service it would ease a lot of minds.”

“He has the skills for it,” Aegon acknowledged, “but not the want. Kingsguard gives up much to serve.”

“You don’t think he would?” Haldon slanted a look at him.

“In another life, perhaps, but not in this one,” he shook his head and glanced aside to where the Stark men rested, smiling at the results of the spar, japing at the two men. Ghost rested near to them in the little bit of shade cast by the mast, his red eyes glinting in the light as he watched his master. “He has a family in the North, one he doesn’t wish to be separated from.” At Haldon’s raised eyebrow, Aegon continued, “At least not for long. I wouldn’t force it upon him. Besides . . . I
“think that his sword will be of better use in other matters.”

“You sound sure.”

Aegon shrugged as he hefted his own practice blade and moved to step away from the wall. “House Targaryen has fallen far. We’ve been reduced to four who carry the name and only two of those bear it openly. If nothing else I would wish for cousins to grow alongside my own sons and daughters.” Moving forward, he met Jaehaerys’ grin with one of his own.

Jaehaerys raised an eyebrow, hefted his sword, and swiped the back of his hand over his slick brow.

With a shake of his head, he caused his brother to frown. “Which of your men would challenge me most, brother?” he called, nodding towards where his brother’s guards were resting, likely attempting to keep cool in the heat of the mid-morning sun.

Jaehaerys paused and ran a hand through his hair, pushing the damp locks away from his face. He glanced over at his guards for a brief moment, nodded, and then looked back at Aegon with a grin. “I think Luca would give you quite a challenge . . . brother.”

Aegon glanced at the Northman, his brother’s swornsword, who had begun to remove his sword belt as Ser Rolly stepped forward to hand him a practice sword. Other than the one spar against Jaehaerys, he had yet to fight against a Northman. Haldon was right, Aegon did need to test his mettle more. He had been kept to the side, hidden upon this ship for far too long.

“Well then,” he grinned, twirling the sword in his hand in a sweeping arc as he stepped forward and Jaehaerys moved away, to where one of his guards held a water skin out for him, “Luca, I would spar with you.”
Interlude: Aegon Part III

Chapter Notes

Jon = Jon Connington
Jaehaerys = Jon Snow

Meriax swirled overhead, disappearing into the dark before sweeping around the mast, his scales glittering in the light from the lantern. He was growing swiftly, active mostly from dusk till dawn when he could be hidden from view most easily. The dragon was gorgeous and Aegon wished that he could watch him fly high during daylight, view the shine of his scales. He was practically nocturnal, sleeping during the day as Aegon trained and studied and keeping Aegon up at night with all his energy.

They couldn’t let him fly free, not here, not yet; there were too many people traveling about the Rhoyne for such a thing to be feasible. The knowledge of it itched at Aegon’s inside, squirming through his veins, making him pace about his room or the deck as his mind whirled with thoughts.

Aegon was nearing eight and ten, a man grown, and what did he have to show for it?

“Aegon?” Jon crossed over to where he was sitting upon the deck, his back against a barrel. He glanced up at the man and then reached out to take the roll of flatbread and fish he proffered. “Thank you.”

As he bit into the fish the spices Ysilla had seasoned it with bit back; the market the ship had docked at several days ago had a fresh harvest of peppers, fruits, and vegetables for sale and barter. Ysilla was adept at mixing the fare of a half dozen cultures into one delectable, but simple, meal. It was lightly spiced, aside from the peppers seeds and salt, the flatbread held the fish, peppers, and mangos in place, sopping up the juices and allowing it to be feasted upon without too much mess. It was a different taste, but not bad.

Jon nodded and dropped to the deck beside him, eyes lifting up to watch as Meriax spun overhead, holding his own half-eaten meal. “He’s growing swiftly,” he said after a while as Aegon licked the juices from his hand.

Eyes darting up to his companion, Aegon nodded. “He will be too big to hide away soon.”

“That he will,” Jon agreed with a sigh. “Aegon . . . we’re going to have to make some decisions and quickly, I fear.” When Aegon didn’t say anything, he continued, “I received word from Magister Illyrio, he had a few suggestions on places for us to—”

“We’re going to Braavos.”

“—go until—Braavos?” Jon drew back his chin and turned his full attention to Aegon. He narrowed his eyes. “You mean to visit the Iron Bank.”

Aegon turned his gaze to meet his foster father’s and nodded. “I do. Meriax can stay out of sight while we’re there, I’m sure, he’s small enough yet. We’re nearly far enough up the Rhoyne we can purchase horses to take us to Pentos and from there I’m sure that the kind magister can arrange us
safe transport to and from Braavos.” He ran his hands over his knees, wiping away the remaining
juices from his meal, and stood.

“Aegon,” Jon said, voice tight, following his lead and standing, “Braavos is several moons away
and a trading hub that sees all manner of people, including quite a few from Westeros. As does
Pentos. The danger—”

“I know, Jon. I have spent my entire life hidden away, my lord,” Aegon pressed his lips together,
meeting Jon’s gaze head-on. “Near eight and ten years spent on a boat or in a house, hidden away,
pretending to be someone I am not. I cannot remember the last time more than a small finger width
of hair at the base of my roots shone its natural color.” He paused for a moment, waiting just until
his foster father opened his mouth to speak before marching on, "I’ve been fed tales of knights,
princes, and kings my entire life. I have trained to be a king and a warrior. And yet I stand here, a
man grown, doing what?”

A squawk filled the air as Meriax twisted and swooped, sliding scant inches from their heads in the
air before twirling and gliding around the single mast and flapping to land upon Aegon’s shoulder.
He was getting too big to do this now, soon Aegon might not even be able to lift him, but for now,
he was able to wrap himself around his boy’s shoulders, brown-red eyes gleaming in the light as he
stared at Jon.

“All the training you have put me through will mean nothing if those that would follow me see me
as nothing but a green boy,” Aegon scoffed a bit. "Those that would follow a name, truly. Will
they even truly believe I am who I claim?"

"They will."

"How can you be so sure?” Aegon asked, fist clenching at his side. Meriax shifted, his snout
bumping against Aegon's cheek. "Such a convenient story, a hidden prince?” Two hidden princes.
Word of Jaehaerys' parentage would inevitably reach the ears of loyalists and enemies alike.

"Your brother believes.” The aging knight still looked as if he tasted something bitter when he
spoke of Jaehaerys.

"My brother is a product of two great families," Aegon lowered his voice a bit as he bit out the
words that had long been inevitable, "both lines lay claim to abilities one can only dream of.
Jaehaerys only had to locate the evidence. He already knew the truth of things."

Jon narrowed his eyes, brow furrowing and lips pressing into a line. "You speak of his warging."

Jaehaerys hadn't exactly tried to hide that particular ability. He had shown it to Aegon and Duck
one morning, joining with Ghost to retrieve a waterfowl that had been shot down by an arrow. His
brother had slipped his skin in front of Jon, Duck, and his own guards. Only Aegon's companions
had been startled. He had been fascinated, having only heard mention of his brother's ability prior.

"That is part of it," he acknowledged, "but not all. Daenys the dreamer saw the fall. Some with the
blood of the First Men have similar abilities. Green dreams, they call them. He's the merging of
two old bloodlines, of ice and fire."

"You're saying he knew because he saw you in a dream,” Jon's voice was flat, disbelieving.

It wasn't the whole truth, but Aegon had promised his brother not to share the truth of things. It was
a promise he could have easily broken and his brother never been the wiser, perhaps, but it was
also a truth that was difficult to believe. He would have had an easier time believing in just the
green sight. There was no need to complicate matters when a simple, somewhat believable option was available to them. Besides, who was to say Daenys’ dreams weren’t the result of living life again and again?

"He has seen a lot," Aegon confirmed. It was the truth, after all, though mixed up with a lie. "He knows what was and what could be."

Jon sighed, glancing away, he rested his hand on the hilt of his sword as he stared out over the water. "Are you planning to chase events Jaehaerys has seen in these dreams or run from them?"

"Which would you prefer?"

"Depends on what the dreams were of," Jon told him, turning back to him.

"Neither," Aegon answered honestly, "There are roads I could travel, but I can imagine better ones." I hope they will be better. "The Iron Bank will provide options that weren’t available before. That doesn’t mean I have to turn away from everything Jaehaerys told me of."

“And what will you do with the money then?” Jon asked, eyebrow rising as he crossed his arms. "Money won’t buy you respect or make a king."

“No,” Aegon nodded his agreement, “it won’t.” He paused, a slow grin sliding over his features as he ran a hand over his dragon’s head. “But it will make me rich and if I’m going to win my kingdom back I need an army. But, more importantly, I need the respect of my people.” He held his hand up before he could speak. “I cannot rely upon just the Golden Company to fight my battles. They may be the most renowned and highly skilled of the sellsword companies, but just they will not defeat all the armies that currently support House Baratheon.” Aegon paused, sighing, as Meriax took flight again, claws digging slightly into his skin as he pushed off his shoulder. “That aside, I was also reminded, recently, that the Golden Company long fought for the enemies of my House. If I come with just them at my back, why should anyone believe the veracity of my claim to the throne?” He watched as Meriax paused mid-flight, swooping his wings in a manner that allowed him to stay still as he breathed out a burst of flame over the river. “Would many not think the company to just be lending support to yet another Blackfyre?”

“House Blackfyre is gone, dead and buried. The War of the Nine Penny Kings saw to that,” Jon pointed out as he tossed the remaining quarter of his meal over the side of the boat. It plopped into the water and the sound of it made Meriax swoop down after it. “The Golden Company has vowed their support to House Targaryen, the last kin to their founders.”

Aegon smiled at the irony and paced towards the rail to lean over, wondering if any river turtles slid through the waters nearby. Even for how clear they were, it was too dark to see any; the moon was hiding from sight tonight. “Is one dragon just as good as the next then?”

The man he called father much of his life came to stand next to him, one hand reaching out to curl about the rail near Aegon’s. Meriax squawked as he swooped back into sight, swirled and then turned back, swooping over the water low and breathing out a short burst of flames that lit the surface and caused a puffing hiss of steam to drift upwards.

“No, Aegon,” he shook his head, “one dragon is not just as good as the next. You’re the, Aegon could hear the wince in his words, “eldest son of Rhaegar Targaryen. The Iron Throne is yours by birthright. Any sensible person would support you over any other Targaryen, Blackfyre, Baratheon,” Jon did spit the last name, “ . . . over any other house that tried to lay claim.”

“And their support would be for what?” Aegon asked, voice low, barely a whisper as he breathed it
out. “A name? An ideal?”

“You,” Jon said, voice rough. “They would be supporting you.”

Aegon let out a bitter chuckle, light and breathy like a puff of smoke. But would they? No one knew him. All but a handful of people thought him dead and buried, his brains dashed upon the floor of the red keep. Dead alongside his mother—Aegon grit his teeth, a muscle-flexing in his jaw—and his sister. Dead at the hands of a man his own father had knighted. How he hoped Rhaegar had rolled over with despair in his grave. Wherever it was.

Rhaegar had made a lot of mistakes in his life and sometimes, maybe a bit more than sometimes, Aegon hated him for it. But it never stuck. The past was the past. Maybe that was why he was able to embrace Jaehaerys so quickly or perhaps it was the fact that he, like Aegon, was just as much a victim of their father’s choices.

Or maybe it was the simple fact that deep down, Aegon longed for the family he never knew.

The two moons Jaehaerys had spent at his side had been a breath of fresh air, a chance to see the world from a different perspective. He had spent so much of his life learning of Westeros and preparing to rule, but never had Aegon met anyone from the seven kingdoms, at least not anyone who had lived there entire life there and knew the people as his brother did.

His brother didn’t only know the North; he also knew much of the rest of the Seven Kingdoms. The knowledge Jaehaerys had gained over hundreds of lives was breathtaking. It made Aegon want to keep the younger man at his side, to pick his brain of all the knowledge that could aid him in the coming years. Much of their time together, especially in the evenings when they would spend time sitting across a cyvase board, was spent trading stories or, rather, Jaehaerys telling Aegon of the many, many lives he’d lived.

Aegon’s heart hurt often at the events that took place for his brother’s pain was so close to the surface at times, no matter how much he might have wished to disguise it. The many paths he had walked, attempted to tread to a better conclusion, was shocking. To hear that Aegon wasn’t even there in some lives?

Even when pressed, the dark-haired young man had stayed mum on the subject, eyes wandering off. On several occasions, when they sat upon the deck under the high sun, Jaehaerys’ eyes caught on the form of Septa Lemore and in those moments Aegon thought he understood.

“Me,” Aegon said softly. “Aegon Targaryen sixth of his name . . . not young Griff son of Griff, you mean.”

Jon paused, stepped closer, and settled a hand on Aegon’s shoulder. “You are your father’s son.”

“But you raised me,” Aegon lifted his eyes and met that of the man he’d long called father, “and out here . . . I wonder if that is all I know to be, truly. For what have I done that is kingly? Why should anyone follow me?”

A breath passed, two, three. Jon dropped his hand away, expression shifting toward resignation.

“What would you have us do then?” he asked.

“First,” Aegon started, swallowing as he lifted his chin, “to Braavos.”

“And then?”
He smiled, lips parting slowly. “If I want to be respected, wanted, then I do believe I need to make a name for myself.” Aegon lifted his bright violet eyes to stare at Meriax as he twisted through the air overhead. “I need to prove myself to be the leader everyone keeps telling me I am.”

“Could you not stay another moon?” Aegon murmured as he carefully chose his move, slender fingers sliding his elephant across the board. Or stay forever “Two moons . . . it feels like mere moments have passed.”

He looked up as he leaned back, watching Jaehaerys’ dark grey eyes as they surveyed the board; the younger boy tapped his fingers lightly against his thigh as he thought, calculating his next moves. Finally, just as Aegon was getting comfortable, he leaned forward and moved his trebuchet.

“Ser Gerik tells of whispers of autumn storms.” Jaehaerys looked up at him and Aegon wished he knew him as well as his brother knew him. He could read Aegon as a ship’s captain read the stars. “I would not risk my men’s lives, nor my own, on the Narrow Sea through them.”

“Plenty of merchants navigate the sea at all times of year from high summer to the middle of winter, dodging icebergs, hurricanes, and heat so high they say the ocean water steams with it,” the words spilled from Aegon’s mouth, he couldn’t help it. He had tasted family, the bond of blood, and now it was slipping through his fingers. “If what you’ve told me comes to pass in this world, the first frosts will be long past by the time I set sail for Westeros with my armies.”

“And I will worry for you just the same.” Jaehaerys’ features were painted in the solemn, serious look he seemed to favor. Kyne, one of his brother’s guard, told him that there were few that seemed to bring him out of it. That his cousins, Robb and Arya, were the ones most apt to achieve success. It was a trait, he said, that Jaehaerys seemed to have inherited from his uncle. Said trait was also one of the few Jon admitted the younger Targaryen had gained from their father. Rhaegar apparently tended towards melancholy and brooding as well. That Jon had let that bit slip to Aegon made his lips quirk when he saw Jaehaerys slip into such moods. “You oft lost ships, men, in the storms or your army arrived in bits.”

“I think the dates you dictated will help us avoid such calamity in this world, brother,” Aegon said as he moved his spearman. He would need to move his king soon. Truly it was unfair that Jaehaerys knew him so well, though Aegon had gotten better at switching up his strategy over the past weeks to avoid the traps that his brother would work him into. Jaehaerys had admitted to playing hundreds, if not more, of these games with Aegon in past lives. He knew the tactics that Aegon favored like the back of his hand.

Jaehaerys looked up at him. “And what if the storms come early or late?” he asked.

“Would they?” Aegon furrowed his brow, glancing up in confusion.

His brother bit his lip. “This world is different,” he said finally after several, long moments of silence. “I arrived years before I ever have before. What’s to say more will not change? The choices I’ve made sent ripples spiraling.” He smiled sadly, self-deprecatingly. “Ripples are what led me to repeat paths, to change paths. They can be unpredictable unless you know the circumstances behind the changes. Dangerous.”

“You think the ripples can change the weather?”
“I think . . .” Jaehaerys grasped his dragon. It was the dark one, ebony. Aegon was using the pale set today. “I think that the White Walkers brought the storm in many lives. Their path south was spearheaded by a fog so cold it froze streams, rivers, lakes. It froze people given a chance. If you stayed too long in one place. Fog, blizzards . . . snowstorms appearing out of nowhere. What ripples might an early attack or even a late one cause?”

Aegon sat straighter; he’d been slouching a tad into the curved back of the chair. “You think they may come early?”

“I don’t know,” Jaehaerys said with a shrug. “The Free Folk are moving south. The Others want an army.”

“And you believe they might follow,” he said, following his brother’s line of reasoning.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” Jaehaerys said as he moved his dragon. “If there’s one thing I may never learn, it’s what motivates them. I know of their birth, the reason for their existence, the pact that was made . . . but never have I ever been able to find out what motivates them, drives them to move south at this time.”

“But you’ve stopped them before.”

“Aye,” he nodded, looking up to meet Aegon’s eyes as he took his king, “I’ve stopped them. We’ve stopped them, near as I can tell.”

Aegon frowned at the wording and his fallen king. “Near as you can tell?”

Jaehaerys sighed. “It’s hard to be sure when one is dead. It’s a rare thing for me to live past the final battle. I usually die during it, if I make it to it, or of the injuries I receive. I can count on my hands the number of lives I’ve lived to see the far side of thirty.” The admission sent a chill down Aegon’s spine. ”For all I know we only pushed them back until the next long night.” With a sweeping gesture, he acknowledged Aegon’s dragon. “You need to guard your king more. The dragon may be powerful, but it is worthless if your king falls.”

He scowled at the pieces and swept his off the board so they could begin placing them again. It wasn’t the first time Jaehaerys had given him this advice. Something told him it wouldn’t be the last.
At the sight of Winterfell in the far distance, Ned could feel himself relax, bit by bit, a measure of relief passing through him. It had been too many moons since he had last seen not only his home but his sons as well. The few letters he had exchanged with Robb had, by necessity, been filled with more pressing matters then how many times Bran and Robin ducked lessons with Maester Luwin or Ser Rodrick found them climbing the castle walls. Had he less of an entourage, Ned would have spurred his mount forward to feel the air rush past him. He could be at the eastern gate of the castle within the half-hour if pressed.

As if sensing his wishes, Storm blurred past him, Nymeria and Lady at her heels, the three direwolves racing each other towards the gate of the new wall that surrounded the nearby fields and winter town. It was the largest of the gates, the closest to the Kingsroad, and planned with giants and mammoths in mind. There were only a small number of the large beasts in the North as yet; only the youngest could fit through the gates and only one of the Watch's ships could transport even a single mammoth at one time from the small, recently repaired dock on the north side of the Wall to the south. It was a situation that would soon be rectified, Ned hoped, after discussions with Lord Manderly had convinced the man to lend several larger, well-constructed vessels to the cause of transporting herds south. The thought of having large populations of the animals, even under the care of the Giants, had intrigued quite a few of Ned's bannermen. There were many projects that might benefit from their use.

"Arya!" Catelyn's voice rang out as a sudden thunder of hooves stamped past him and his guard.

Ned couldn't help but smile at the sight of his youngest daughter spurring her horse toward home. Her hair flowed behind her and she crowed with pleasure and laughed as she chased after the direwolves. A moment later her swornsword and another guard followed behind.

"Ned!" his wife's voice was taught as she brought her horse up close.

He met her eyes and tempered his smile slightly. "She'll be fine, Cat. We're home," he assured her, though his words did little to affect the pinched lines around her lips and brow. "There's not a man within our walls that would let harm come to her."

"And outside those walls?"

She was referring to the workers, the men who had come from far and wide for the promise of wages and training to fortify and expand the castles and towns of the North. They were a mixed bunch, mostly from the North and Riverlands, but some had come from other regions, seeking, at the very least, food to fill their bellies and a decent place to sleep.

"Edmon and Theric will keep an eye on her. As will the wolves."

In the distance, Nymeria had pulled back, leveled off with Arya's mount and Ned was, not for the first time, glad of the training they had spent so much effort on to keep the horses calm in the presence of the direwolves. Even while they were gone, Robb's Greywind and the other two wolves would have been playing in the stables and plodding about the yearlings being trained up as mounts for the guard. Should war come, the wolves would cause no issues for Winterfell's cavalry.

"And if the horse throws her?"

He glanced at her, brow raised.
Catelyn sighed and shook her head. "I know. I worry too much."

"I worry as well," Ned said softly, after a moment. "They are growing so fast . . . and yet just yesterday it seems Robb was but a babe in your arms, meeting me in the courtyard."

"Too fast," she agreed and met his gaze again, worry plain in her eyes. "Bran is eight now, we missed his name day."

"Aye," Ned said, fingers clenching about the soft leather reins, "We did." It couldn't be helped. Originally they had planned to arrive home the sennight before his son's name day, to celebrate with a feast and gifts procured from merchants along the streets of White Harbor. Jon would have been the only one absent barring fair winds the entire trip from Braavos. They had been held up, their plans torn asunder as many often were. Ned could only be glad that he, his family, and his retinue had remained safe and faced no conflict of their own.

They just had to pick up the pieces, some of which were still missing.

The North had always been Ned's home, no matter how much time he spent fostering in the Vale, there had been little doubt in his mind that one day he would return. Robert had made grand overtures, offering positions in his household when they were still green boys learning to fight and command under Jon Arryn's tutelage, but deep down he always knew that home could never be anywhere south of the Neck.

He knew his land like the back of his hand, the lords and ladies and the people he ruled, or so he had thought until the stories his son told him of repeated betrayal, death, and of a North that tore itself apart. Lords he had fought beside, trusted, stabbed his eldest in the heart time and again, while others served up his younger children on a platter to their enemies, betraying vows. It had chilled him to the bone, not that he could let Jon, Robb, or even Catelyn see the true effects the stories had on him, there were some things one had to keep private.

Ned breathed deep as he surveyed the land, tasting the delicate cold that was so common in every region of the North. Yet here it seemed different. The air was crisper, the wind sharper, even as the clouds hung low above them the closer they traveled to the Dreadfort. There was an edge to the air, in the shape of the land that unsettled. The eyes of the smallfolk they passed that had Ned sitting straighter in the saddle. It was peaceful, yes, the Bolton lands had always remained as such under Roose's hard hand, but this was not the sort of peace he preferred.

Storm lopped nearby, ears alert, eyes roving the landscape, feeding off the tense threads that pulled at his mind. The sight of her, large as a horse, fierce with bright white teeth visible in a panting mouth caused any they met upon the road or in the nearby fields to stay back, eyes wide.

Like any other lands they had passed through on their journey, men and women stopped their work in nearby fields or with their carts upon the dirt road to greet them. The direwolf sigil, proudly displayed by the guard at the front and back of the retinue was looked upon kindly and with reverence even in this part of the realm. Storm and her daughters a bit off-putting, but most trusted House Stark enough to do little more than move their carts to the other side of the road or stay yards back as they called out greetings.
It should have made him feel at ease and yet . . . and yet.

When pushed to war his son's army had consisted more of his noble bannerman's forces than Winterfell's own. Houses once separate kingdoms had more men to call upon than those that had ruled the North for millennia. Later, Jon had to rely near solely on Wildlings and most of those same, supposedly loyal men who had refused the call. House Stark had to stand strong, support the North rather than step on the shoulders of families that swore allegiance to them. Long-standing oaths had meant little in the end.

Roose Bolton—House Bolton, truly—had been one such lord. Sworn to serve House Stark. One of Robb's top advisors and military leaders. And yet . . . the stories of his betrayal, one way or another, had repeated more than any other and often with less cause to justify them. A knife in the heart at a wedding, a poisoning at a feast, a siege that ended with Jon tortured, Arya raped and flayed when she fought, and Bran's head on a spike . . . poor Jeyne Poole and so many others disfigured and broken. While Roose may have initiated many of the occurrences, however, it was his bastard Ramsay who was at the heart of most of the cruelty divested upon the North.

The South whispered many things about bastards, things which had colored his lady wife's opinion of Jon for much of his life. Ramsay seemed to embody those words to the point that one could almost understand the mistrust forced upon any bastard. He reveled in it and seemed to have no qualms about the torture and chaos he spread. The lives his deeds changed forever.

The stories had placed a conundrum in front of Ned. Many, if not all, of the crimes Jon was able to describe, had yet to take place in this life. Punishing a man for crimes yet done wasn't something he wanted to do, nor could he justify it. If he forbade Jon from arranging Viserys' early demise, Ned couldn't go and arrange Ramsay's without just cause. But how could he remove Ramsay from the board without killing him?

Roose only had one trueborn child, Domeric who was currently still fostered in the Vale. Thankfully, with the help of Jon Arryn, Ned had arranged for the lord the boy was fostering with to provide early warning for his return to the North. He would also be asked to report directly to Winterfell, rather than the Dreadfort. Ned wanted a chance to talk to the boy that may one day become the Lord of the Dreadfort before he went home.

What happened to Domeric in Jon's other lives was nearly unknown, his son had never interacted with him following Ghost's birth and they had met only a few times at feasts as young children. The knowledge he could provide was all second hand and very limited. The boy was an unknown, but one that had to be better than the alternative.

Ned couldn't deny it, not anymore. Where once certain things had niggled slightly but been put aside as personality differences and perhaps a slight moral conflict, the details of House Bolton's actions in many of Jon's lives had left him second-guessing every interaction he ever had with the Leech Lord.

"He was always loyal," Jon had said once, as he sat in hay, direwolf pups crawling upon him, tears shining upon a face badly hidden behind tousled curls. "Until he wasn't."

A gross simplification, Ned was sure, that ignored the schemes and plots hatched behind closed doors and via messenger and raven.

More oft than not, it seemed, Roose Bolton had grabbed upon the first opportunity he saw to seize power and finally turn his House into the ruling body of the North. By the time House Bolton came to power, the realm was in chaos and the South's hold on the North was tenuous at best. Ned could see the man's intentions clear as day. Without dragons to fear, within a generation or three of
careful planning, House Bolton could have betrayed the South and fractured back into its own kingdom. The man had always been cunning and his strategic mind made for a great military advisor, but he was also a man of his own mind. His land and people reflected him, more than most.

Bolton lands also seemed to also be devoid of any wildling faces, be they passing through or settled. Even in White Harbor young men and women who previously lived off the land and spent their days fishing in ice-cold water upon small boats with little room to do more than store a few fish and sit, had made their way to find what offerings they had. A small number even sought transport to Essos or elsewhere, not content just being south of the Wall.

"Is that the Dreadfort?" Arya asked from nearby as the crested a slight rise. They had gone around the Weeping Water, rather than cross it directly. The journey had allowed them to meet with more of the smallfolk and minor houses that dotted the land. It had been an eye-opener for them all, even Ned, in seeing how many ruins of old holdfasts dotted the land and how much farmland still lay fallow.

"It is," Catelyn answered.

"It looks so dreary," Sansa spoke up softly from his other side. There had been a marked change in her over the last sennight, ever since the execution she had witnessed.

Initially, he had balked at the idea of having his daughter's witness such a thing, but he had focused on the memory of Jon's words. The lives his daughters led in most of their lives had been horrible; lives he wouldn't have wished upon even his enemies children, but they had both grown strong from the experiences. While he would do everything in his power to keep them from having to live through those same, harsh experiences, some of the lessons they had learned were ones that Ned couldn't deny they needed.

Sansa had especially needed to learn some of them. Her infatuation with a cruel monster and need to please—to be a perfect, idealized southern lady—had inadvertently led to his own death and doomed her to years of torture. Life wasn't a song, knights and princes weren't always as pretty words and the tales she read, again and again, painted them to be.

Arya also had lessons to learn, though they likely wouldn't impact her as great as the ones Sansa needed. Already his eldest daughter had changed. Perhaps the most marked was her relationships with her direwolf and Septa Mordane. Where once she listened with bated breath, full attention on every detail slipping out of that woman's mouth, now she questioned them and compared what the septa said to how things were in the North. She spoke more to her mother and, in turn, Cat gave her fewer honeyed facts.

The direwolf Lady no longer wore a collar of ribbons and Sansa claimed she lost the leash in the fields outside of White Harbor. Lady hunted beside her mother and siblings at night, ranging away from the group and coming back with rabbits for the men to skin. She was still the cleanest of them all, and the politest, but she had let out a bit of the wildness her siblings—especially Nymeria—all embodied.

"Do they really have sconces made of human skeletons?" Arya asked, causing her sister to blanch.

"Aye," Ned said before glancing over Arya's head to meet his wife's gaze. Neither of them liked visiting the Dreadfort. The history alone was enough to set one's skin-crawling, but he couldn't rightly ignore one of his bannermen, especially one with a large force and the potential to be the largest thorn in his side. "The Dreadfort has a long history and House Bolton's history is a long one," he looked pointedly at Arya, "as you would know if you didn't skip your lessons."
Her face colored and she bit her lip. "I don't skip them . . . much! Not history lessons anyway," she muttered, avoiding her mother's eyes. "Besides I'm the one that knew about the sconces!"

"Only because they're human skeletons," Sansa told her, nose wrinkled in disgust.

"You didn't remember!"

"I was trying to forget!"

"Girls," Catelyn sighed and met Ned's eyes. Their daughters had spent much of the journey bickering over this and that, especially since leaving White Harbor. Jon's absence seemed to leave a hole they felt compelled to fill with endless chatter that inevitably ended with one of them, usually Arya, riding farther back with the guards. It may have just been that his son was very good at mediating and anticipating their disagreements, breaking them up before they could fully manifest.

"Lord Stark," Theric, a young guardsman who held the honor of carrying House Stark's banner on this day, called out, tearing his attention away from his family. "Riders, ahead, from the Dreadfort."

The castle walls may loom ahead, growing larger to the eye with every step the horses took, but they were still half an hour out or more. His outrider would have reached the Dreadfort hours past, as was normal, to warn of their approach. There was no reason for men to greet them outside the walls. The North may not have held to many protocols of the South, but as liege lord, first greeting to an announced visit should be held within the castle's main courtyard.

The guards adjusted about Ned and his family, listening to the orders he gave and moving accordingly. Even had he said nothing, they would have known their duty and done as told. If anything, he spoke more to reassure his wife and daughters, to teach his girls the appropriate response to greeting strangers—even those who should be trustworthy.

They slowed their pace and in turn, the approaching riders slowed their own, until they stopped ahead, just yards from Ned and his men. For their part, the riders appeared unarmed, wary as Ned's men had bared their own weapons, ready for anything that may come.

They were Bolton men, no doubt, the flayed man crest displayed on their armor in such a way to show their loyalty, but not confuse loyalty with lineage. Five riders stopped before them in total, two at the front and three at the back. All looked wary and surveyed with them with unease.

It took a moment for Ned to recognize the lead man, he had only met him a handful of times. He was old, bald but for a crown of grey. Maurik Hilliard, Castellan of the Dreadfort.

"Lord Stark," Maurik's voice was taut and his pale blue-grey eyes tired. He urged his horse forward, stopping, somehow managing to keep control over his steed as Storm paced forward herself. He stopped several yards away, eyes drifting to the direwolf for but a second before meeting Ned's gaze. "I was glad to hear from your rider how close you were. It is good that you are here."

"This is quite unusual, castellan," Ned said, adjusting his grip on his reins and squaring his shoulders. "I assume you have good reason for meeting me upon the road and without your lord."

"These are unusual circumstances, my lord." Maurik inclined his head but kept his gaze steady. "Lord Bolton is dead. I did not think it wise to greet you first within our walls. Not when his assassin is still at large."
Interlude: Ned III Part II

Returning to the sight of his household lined arranged within Winterfell’s main courtyard, waiting to greet him, his eldest standing tall at the front beside his youngest boys, relaxed yet more tension within his being. Ned ignored the announcement to stop his steed and dismounted, allowing one of Hullen’s stable boys to take the reins.

The household bowed before him while Arya scowled from atop her horse. The direwolves were sharing their own reunion nearby, Greywind wrestling Nymeria to the ground as Shaggydog and Summer greeted their mother.

Ned glanced towards Arya, catching her eye. She pressed her lips tight and looked down before allowing the stable boy that took her mount's reins to aid her as he strode forward toward the children he hadn’t seen for far too long.

“My lord,” Robb murmured after Ned waived away the protocol his eldest had evoked and strode forward. He couldn’t fault him, arranging this on his own would have been good practice. “Winterfell is yours.”

Nodding, he pulled Robb into a hug. “You have done well, my son.” It wasn’t often that he indulged in such with his eldest children anymore, especially in public, but with everything . . . he felt the need to indulge.

“Thank you, father,” Robb said with a smile when they stepped apart. He smiled, nodding, as Bran and Rickon, unable to contain themselves further, darted forward. He dropped down to greet them, relishing in the feel of their small hands grasping at his cloak and vest. After a moment, he pulled back a bit and settled a hand on each of their heads, ruffling them gently.

“Father, I hit the target yesterday!” Bran grinned widely. “Robin hit the target too,” he glanced over his shoulder towards his cousin and dropped the volume of his voice, ever so slightly. “The outside of it, anyway.”

“You will have to show me. Perhaps tomorrow?”

Bran nodded as Rickon finally dislodged himself, smiling up at him, clutching at his arm. Both had grown in the time Ned had been gone, Rickon more than Bran, but both had grown visibly older in the moons they had been parted. His heart always ached when he had to leave his children and miss milestones in their lives, but such was life.

“My boys,” Catelyn’s voice wavered as she strode forward to greet them as well. Bran and Rickon tore away from him to run to their mother’s skirts, dropping any remaining hint of propriety without thought.

He smiled, watching as his wife buried her face into Rickon’s red curls and held Bran tight to her side. His wife had missed her sons dearly, lost sleep over being away from them. While they were away, settled together in unfamiliar furs in a bed too stiff and room too cold, Ned had teased her about the lone grey hair that had seemingly grown overnight from the part of her hair.

A squeal broke his attention and he glanced aside to where Robb was swinging Sansa in a circle to her protests as Arya giggled.
It was good to be home.

The duties of a lord were never complete, no matter how Ned might have wished it to be so. Too much was happening in the North, nay the world, for him to let things be for long. No matter how much time he wished he could spend soaking his muscles in the hot springs, letting his mind wander far, before the sky streaked with dusk he gave in.

Robb had done well, all told, as acting lord. With strong advisors at his side, his son had continued the work Ned and Catelyn had initiated and made appropriate judgments according to the notes Maester Luwin provided. His accountings were accurate, if a bit hard to read in places. His eldest's handwriting was not the best, but the practice had done him well. As the notes went on they became clearer and the language more concise.

“The first shipment of glass arrived three days ago,” Robb told him, when he inquired if Jon had sent any word on the business arrangements made in Braavos. “One of the guards returned with the goods and word.”

Ned glanced up as Robb shifted through the pile of documents he had laid upon the desk. A small spark of worry had ignited when Jon had not been present in the courtyard earlier that day, but he had known that there was a chance he would not be there. He had prepared for it, during his discussions with Ser Gerik he had made arrangements to keep Jon safe and yet keep his son from being weighed down by difficult choices.

Raising children, with their differing personalities and oft unpredictable actions was difficult, no matter how rewarding it was to see them grow from babes to young men and women. With Jon, Ned faced a whole separate set of issues.

Jon was not one to sneak off to the winter town brothels or get lost in his cups. Ned could not see him making any decision that would bring shame upon his house or hurt his family. The memories that had been thrust upon him years past had quashed any such rebellious thoughts before they even sprouted. The boy had never been as cheerful and outgoing as his siblings, having taken his status as a ‘bastard’ to heart at an early age, but that day, when the wolf pups were born, he had changed in ways Ned even still had difficulty fathoming.

The knowledge of events and worlds filled with such pain weighed heavy on Ned, but what lay on his shoulders was nothing like the weight that Jon carried. He ached to protect him, to keep the promise he made six and ten years ago now to Lyanna.

“I set Vayon to organizing the construction of the additional gardens. Several plots have already been leveled ahead of construction,” his son told him as he flipped through pages.

“Master Byford has approved the plans?” Ned asked. “Inspected—”

Robb nodded. “Inspected each pane. He spent the day in the library with Maester Luwin going over the archive, scrutinizing archived plans and drawing new ones to fit our needs.”

_He will make a better lord than I, one day._ Ned had never been meant to be a true lord. That had been Brandon’s role. For all Rickard Stark had taken pride in his children, he had only seen the route he wished their lives to take. He hadn’t seen any alternatives.

Perhaps if he had, Brandon and Lyanna might be alive. The Targaryens might still hold court in
King’s Landing.

His sister might have been queen, instead of an ill-fated princess dowager.

“Here.” Robb set a stack of papers in front of him, several smaller sheaths laid upon longer, thicker parchment detailing contracts and withdrawals from the Iron Bank.

Ned settled them onto the table and sat. Since he passed his thirtieth year, the wounds built up over a lifetime of training and war seemed to have caught up with him. It took longer now for his body to relax and old injuries to stop aching after a long ride.

“The seals were secure until I opened them,” his son told him as he checked them. Ned fingered one of the seals; white wax with the direwolf sigil imprinted upon it. “I am sure of it.”

He glanced over the larger sheets, the edges of them curled slightly where they had once been rolled up. It was likely the large tomes set upon a nearby chair had been used to flatten them down. The writing was neat and small, easily read and clearly dictated to a well-practiced scribe.

His son’s signature, in place of his own, was set upon the bottom of the page.

Jon Stark.

One of the pages required his response. By the dates upon it, however, he had another four moons before the Iron bank required it. They had left him with plenty of time, no doubt to account for the possible perils of the storms brewing in the Shivering Sea. They had little to worry about, in the long run regarding the North, after all. The Starks cleared their debts regularly with the bank.

The terms listed in the loan Jon had arranged were fair, more so than Ned had been expecting. Better, perhaps, than he might have bargained.

“This is from your brother,” Ned lifted one of the smaller letters. Jon’s script was unmistakable after spending hours poring through the records his son had made in the past few years.

Lord Stark,

I hope this finds you and our family in good health and great spirits.

Thank you, father. I cannot express in words how grateful I am for the letter Ser Gerick held in confidence. He did exactly as you requested, providing them only once a certain opportunity presented itself. We will be making our way to Volantis in short order, as we once speculated. Information has come to me that indicates a great chance for success.

I have made arrangements for delivery of the gold, by representatives of the Iron Bank, as the contract indicates. With Ser Gerick’s assistance, I have also contracted with multiple merchants for glass and other materials the North is in great need of, or will be come winter.

Though I have great faith that the voyage we are about to embark on will go smoothly and reap great rewards for our future, I do wish that it would not last so long. I miss the North. Ghost is surely not happy about spending moons upon the ship. He does seem to have found his sea legs, finally.

I dream of Winter sometimes. Waves crashing into the beach, mountains and plains far below.
Grass as far as the eye can see. Essos is far different from the North, even here in Bravos.

Please give my love to everyone. As promised, I will return bearing gifts from my travels.

Jon Stark

“He’s going to find Aegon,” Robb’s voice was quiet, “isn’t he?”

“He is,” Ned confirmed, setting the letter down.

"Jon missed him."

"He did," Ned agreed. From the moment Jon had first spoken of his elder half brother, the pain and longing had been evident in his voice. Jon loved his family, be it Stark or Targaryen. His son had a large capacity to love and dealt it out with little regard to the pain it might cause him. It was astounding, how after so many lives full of pain and betrayal, Jon’s heart remained inherently good.

Robb’s eyes were bright when he looked up, face serious. “But he will return.”

“Aye,” Ned nodded, “as he promised.”

He glanced up at Robb, holding another aloft, an unfamiliar seal still attached to one side.

“A merchant brought it to Lord Manderly. He then charged the guard with delivering it, not wanting to risk a raven.”

Ned flattened it out, creasing the folds back to allow it to lay as flat as possible. The writing wasn’t as legible as the other pages that lay upon the desk, but he was long used to such. As educated as most lords and ladies were, not all could write well or had a maester in their hold to depend on. The mountain clans and hill tribes certainly were not as ‘civilized’ as most. Even by northern standards.

He raised an eyebrow in surprise as he read before they pressed tight in a furrow. The appeal he had made had been a dangerous one, but the coming winter had compelled him to take the risk. If only he was the only one partaking in such.

The Dreadfort was just as he remembered it. Where Winterfell’s walls had always seemed to be alive, full of mirth and love, this castle’s walls held an aura of pain and darkness. The maester who had taught him history as a boy would have rapped his knuckles if such thoughts were expressed in front of him.

“It is not the castle, young lord. A castle is naught but stone and mortar, wood and iron, built by men. There is nothing inherent about such a place. It cannot be good, nor can it be evil. History is what imparts such feelings upon us. Memories. Nothing more.”

Still, it was not a place Ned would wish to dwell for long. The sennight they had planned to stay had already been pressing his desired limits, now, staring at the corpse of Roose Bolton, he knew those limits were about to be surpassed.

“It was poison, my lord,” the auburn-haired maester of the Dreadfort, Tybald, said. He stood on
the other side of the table the body was set upon for the examination. “The signs of it are clear.”
He glanced up, his close-set eyes standing out in the pinched look his face had taken.

“You bear no doubt?”

Tybald glanced at Maurik. The Dreadfort’s castellan clenched his jaw and narrowed his eyes as
the maester. For his part, the man shuffled and glanced away, down at the body laid out before
them. “No, my lord, the signs were very clear. The dose he was given could have felled perhaps a
dozen men. At the correct dosage . . . perhaps it may have appeared as an illness. The amount he
was given, however . . .”

“He began vomiting within moments,” Maurik’s voice was grim, “blood and bile. The girl that
served him called for aid immediately, but he was gone before the closest guard could reach him.”

“And the poison?”

“A combination of hemlock and at least two other poisons, I wager,” Tybald scratched at his
shoulder, shaking his head. “Though I cannot be sure. I have documented the symptoms and
manner of delivery—”

Ned shot him a look, eyes narrowed.

Tybald paused, swallowing.

“We fed what remained of his food and drink to pigs,” Maurik said. “If you’d like I can show them
to you. The poison was in his ale as well as the stew.”

“Yet the stew from the kitchen was just that. The swines dined well that night.”

“And the serving girl?”

“Dead.” Maurik’s face had darkened. “I ordered her placed in the dungeon under guard. The
guard was felled by an arrow through the eye and she was found in the woods, throat slit.”

“Have you done a full accounting of the household since?” Ned asked, not liking where his
thoughts were taking him. “Has anyone gone missing in the days before or since your lord’s
murder?”

Jon had warned him of the dangers House Bolton could present. Yet, there had to be a reason for
this change of events. Not once had Roose died while both his sons lived. He had also never lost
his life before the war began.

‘Given the choice, Roose Bolton was always the lesser of two evils. Better a man you could
understand, then one inherently unpredictable.’ It was a choice Jon had been forced to make many
times. And not just with the Boltons.

Tybald nodded, but it was the castellan who answered.

“Three guards, the kennel master’s daughter, and . . . Ramsay Snow are unaccounted for.”

“Roose’s bastard?” Ned asked, stilling. “I was unaware that Roose had taken the boy into his
household.”

“Though I did spend time providing him lessons as a boy,” Tybald shifted, his chain jingling softly,
“it was not until the past year that he was afforded a place.”
“Lord Bolton had decided to educate the boy in hopes of gaining him a place of favor in the household of one of your sons. When you made it known Moat Cailin would be going to one of your sons, he thought perhaps, if it or another hold were to go to Jon . . . Stark, he might look favorably upon having a bastard within his midst.”

It was a fair assumption, and one that might have proved true had they not been aware of Ramsay’s character. Jon had already made suggestions regarding the placement of a few noble bastards. He thought quite highly of both Gendry Waters and Larence Snow for the roles they had played numerous times.

“And you believe he may have had a part in this?”

Maurik sighed, staring down at the still form of his lord. “I wish that I did not think him capable of it, but he is the only one that makes sense. When Lord Bolton passed I had him sequestered, but the guard at his door is among the missing as well. Lord Roose and Ramsay also did not get along well. Not as a father and son and Ramsay may have acted his part as a member of the household, but a keen eye could discern he was not happy in his place or with his lord father's orders.”

“The boy’s actions did not help, either,” Tybald snorted.

Ned met the maester’s gaze, waiting for him to elaborate.

Maurik stared at the maester, eyes narrowing in silent warning.

“Tell me, Lord Stark,” Tybald began, lifting his chin, “did you not notice the lack of wildlings in the surrounding lands? The boy erred and was caught. Lord Bolton was worried news of what Ramsay had done would reach your ears. Two days before his death, Lord Bolton threatened to send the boy to the Wall.”
It had been decades, perhaps more than a century, since the last time Winterfell's glass gardens had required more than the most basic of repairs. According to Master Builder Byford, the last time more than a single pane had required replacing near half the room had been destroyed by chunks of ice the size of a man's fist. That winter had been a harsh one, storms tormented the North from Skagos to Barrowtown with winds that fell trees, snowdrifts that climbed halfway up Winterfell's highest tower, and rain that froze, turning the top layer of snow into solid ice. Or so the stories said.

The first of the new glass gardens was being erected within Winterfell's walls, taking up much of a courtyard in a lesser-used section of the castle. Less scaffolding was needed and it allowed for the builders multiple perspectives on the construction that, had they started in the fields outside the castle walls, would have involved a tad more trial and error. There was also spring that fed into this particular courtyard, the pool would sit in the middle of the garden, adding another heating element and the ability to grow differing crops. In all the gain of just this one building alone was a great boon. It would double their number of people and animals they could feed during the winter and increase the overall health of everyone.

Ned sighed, hand curling over the window sill of his solar as he watched as Gendry Waters and several journeymen blacksmiths and builders carefully secure one of the panes that fit onto the roof of the glasshouse in the distance. It was dangerous business, but all seemed to have taken the instructions Byford had dictated to heart. It was good to see the boy fitting in so well; as he watched the group found some amusement, pausing their work for but a moment to laugh jovially.

When the boy had first arrived at Winterfell, he and his younger half brother had been half afraid of their own shadows, jumping to do anything and everything asked of them lest they indeed be sent to the Wall as Jon Arryn had originally intended. They were good lads, though, and as yet Ned saw no reason to think either would need go to the Wall to swear oaths unless it was their own choice. Gendry was fitting in well under Mikken, growing stronger day after day and learning to smith with a fervor Mikken could barely keep up with. The man was so unnerved at times by Gendry's obsession with proving himself, eventually the lad had been sent to spend hours learning to use the weapons he crafted with the guard.

His brother, a boy named Jorys, was himself fitting in well as a runner for the builders. He assisted where he could, but his youth hindered him in many ways. He was learning quickly, in all areas. He had a thirst for knowledge that Ned could only wish some of his own children had. Each day the boy spent hours sitting in the library by candlelight, studying numbers and letters. Had it not been for his intense interest in construction, Ned might have worried the boy was missing out by not giving himself over to the Citadel. He certainly had the mind for it.

Ned smiled at the sight of the black-haired boy scurrying forward with a hammer, holding it up to Gendry. The two were more alike than different, their parentage shining like a beacon that anyone who had ever lain eyes on Robert or his brothers could discern.

"My lord?" There was a light knock on the open door to the room.

He turned away from the window and nodded. "Come in, Theon," Ned told the young man, moving towards his desk. "Close the door, please."

Theon did as asked, securing the door, barely preventing it from slamming as he did so. There was an air of uncertainty around the ten and nine-year-old as he moved through the room, a caution that
he had rarely exhibited as a boy. At least after that first year spent tiptoeing around the Stark family, but a nine years old and far from everything and everyone he knew.

Ned moved a few stacks of paper around on his desk, listening and occasionally catching Theon fidget and shift out of the corner of his eye.

"How long have you lived in Winterfell?"

Blue eyes froze where they were staring at Ned's hands as they arranged the mess on his desk. Theon's brow furrowed and he looked up to meet Ned's gaze.

"Ten years," he answered after a moments hesitation.

"Ten years." Ned nodded and then sighed, setting a ledger atop everything else. Sitting down, he motioned for Theon to do the same. "You were but a boy when I brought you here, a child . . ." he paused, waiting for Theon to settle across from him. "A hostage to keep your lord father in check. To prevent him from taking further action against the Iron Throne."

"Has my father . . ." Theon swallowed thickly. "Has he done something?"

"No. Not that I am aware of."

"Have I done something?"

Ned could see the boy's eyes dart, trying to think of something, anything that could explain his current situation. He raised an eyebrow. "Have you?"

"No, my lord," Theon said and then paused. "I—" Wincing, he asked, "I've only lain with Ros the last six moons . . . if anyone else is claiming—"

"I am afraid I have done you a disservice, in many ways, Theon," he interrupted that line of thought. Theon was well known to frequent whores, but the whores of winter town were well prepared to prevent any unwanted child and Ned had long ago had a conversation with the owners of each establishment about what issues a bastard child of a Greyjoy would face. Few were keen on even considering having a child that might be torn away from them to live amongst the Ironmen. "You have been my ward, hostage or not, for ten years. You are a man grown now, yet still a hostage and set to remain one until either your father dies or the King declares otherwise. You have learned side by side with my children and in many ways you are my son—"

Theon's breath was sharp and his eyes wide.

"—but you are also the son of Lord Greyjoy. An Ironborn. I have taught you and my household has taught you as we would any northern child. And perhaps I was wrong in doing so." Ned turned the ledger around, moving it across the desk to Theon.

The young man's eyes darted down to it and then back up to Ned. "My lord?"

"Look that over," Ned told him, grabbing several sheaths of parchment, "take your time. Then I would like your thoughts."

Scratching away at the page in front of him, formulating a letter in response to one he had recently received from Prince Doran Martell—a surprise that had taken him some consideration on how to deal with. Knowing that Jon had both met with and invited Oberyn Martell north did little to ease the headache that had grown since the courier had arrived with it. His son had forgotten to add that little detail to the letter and documents that he'd sent home upon embarking for Volantis.
It worried him, more than a little, the thought of the brother, family, of Princess Elia Martell riding through Winterfell's gates. Since the rebellion relations between the North and Dorne had been stilted at best. Even prior both regions had little to do with one another, but the blame thrown between each side during the war and dead buried on both sides had destroyed what little trust both regions had in one another. The death of Elia and her children still stung deep among the Dornish, just as the death of Lyanna still echoed through the North.

Ned only hoped that the red viper, his daughters, and any others that may come north would do so to listen and talk and not attempt revenge for past deeds. *It would be best for Jon to be here when they arrive.*

"Lord Stark?"

He glanced up, eyeing the young Greyjoy.

"Are these just detailing the North's eastern fleet?"

"What makes you think so?" Ned asked.

Theon leaned forward, finger running over the notations of the houses that owned and operated, or primarily funded, the various vessels. He was confident, but then he always had been, when it came to discussing anything related to seafaring. They spoke on the subject for some time, pausing momentarily for Ned to provide him other records and additional information. As time went on, he relaxed more and more, a smile growing where Ned had rarely seen one in his presence for moons, perhaps years.

It was his fault, truly, the words Jon had spoken, tales of Theon's betrayal had affected him more than he thought. More than Ned had wanted them to. Theon had always been the child he would lose eventually, more than Jon when the truth was told, more than his daughters marrying into other households. There had been so much to deal with that Ned had found himself floundering when it came to dealing with the possible futures that lay ahead for Theon.

"I don't..." Jon ran a hand over his face, nose scrunched up and grey eyes squinting. "It's not that Theon isn't loyal, it's... if he goes to Pyke he will always find himself torn. For all that he has grown up beside Robb and I, is far more northern than Ironborn, it is his home. Balon Greyjoy is his father and Yara... Asha... his sister is his sister. When he goes there and—" he shook his head. "Theon's always been proud of his heritage, at least that is what he shows the world."

"And when he lands on Pyke, a greenboy," Ned sighed, "a Greenland who has spent more of his life riding horses than rowing he loses that." His eyes ran over the pages of Theon's actions, life to life.

They were in his solar, a discussion regarding trade and going over the possibility of expanding the small amount of ice trade that shuttled small quantities down the coast to White Harbor and a few other cities having taken a turn towards the Greyjoy heir. The boy had been nearly a ghost, taking part in the periphery of their lives the past year or so. Robb was closest to him and still maintained a tight friendship with the young man, but Jon was near unable to stay long in his presence.
It was an issue that Ned couldn't blame him for, but also knew would have to be overcome. This life and the people within it were not the same as those others. This Theon could change, could make better choices—or never have to make the ones that led to his betrayal at all.

"It blows the wind right out of his sails," Jon confirmed. "It doesn't help his sister has, for all intents and purposes, taken his place as heir. Without Theon about, Balon has spent years training her to take over the Iron Islands. When Theon returns he finds himself having to prove himself against not just a sibling, but a woman."

He could understand the insult that would be, in Theon's place as an Ironborn and a man. Theon had been being groomed to rise to Lord Greyjoy from the time he was torn from his mother's arms and the shores of the Iron Islands. To lose his place in the world because of . . .

Ned's hand curled into a fist. "They see him as a northerner. Foreign."

"Aye," Jon's lips pressed tight as he nodded, "they do."

Ned had fostered in the Vale as a boy and a young man. He had learned much in the footsteps of Jon Arryn. His honor—that which the whole realm seemed to define him by—came more from his time spent in the Vale than the years spent growing beside his blood siblings in the North. Robert had japed at him once while drunk off his ass that he embodied the knights of songs and bedtime tales more than any southerner ever could.

Perhaps that was true, though Ned still retained much of what it meant to be northern. Even so, a few lords had been wary of him at the beginning. Ned had been different from his father, different from his wild brother and his feisty sister. The Quiet Wolf, he was called by many. Less apt to run headlong into a situation or let his temper take hold over his entire being. Less likely to get himself killed.

Or not, considering the choices he made in world afterworld.

Politics had never been his strong suit, even now he second-guessed every choice he made and the thought of finding himself thrust into the lions den in the Red Keep, especially knowing everything, made his skin crawl. Ned knew his strengths, now better than he ever had before.

"Good." Ned let a small smile show, acknowledging the insights Theon had been able to provide. Not all were correct and the gaps in Theon's education were glaring, but he knew more than Robb would have on the subjects. He leaned back, letting silence grow between them for a long moment as Theon leaned back into his chair as well. "You have been here for ten years."

Theon sat up, back straightening.

"I do not want you to go. Not now, not ever," he drew in a deep breath, "I have raised you, my wife has raised you these past ten years. I know that this situation was not of your choosing, nor that of your father's, but it was a choice made and I hope that we have managed to make the best of what life has given us. I have taught you everything I can about being a Northman, but—but I cannot teach you how to be an ironman. I cannot take you out upon a ship and ensure you know each nook and cranny or show you how to judge the sky, stars, and clouds for how terrible an oncoming storm will be." Ned stood slowly and made his way around the desk. "It is time that you learned
those things to prepare for when you one day take Lord Balon Greyjoy's place."

Theon stood as well, hands quaking slightly.

"I do not want you to go, Theon," Ned said quietly, settling his hands on Theon's shoulders. "If I could, I would keep you and the rest of my children within this castle's walls for the rest of time. But, that would not be fair to you. I cannot release you from fosterage, but I can transfer your guardianship on a temporary basis to Lord Manderly. If you wish it, I would see you learning at his heel on how to run a port town and how to captain a ship at the side of his men."

Ned smiled at the look upon his ward's face. It was an array of emotion, flitting past one by one at such a pace it was near difficult to interpret. Hope and want eventually won out. "Do you wish it?"

"I do," Theon's voice cracked a bit, rough on the edges. "I do wish it, my lord."

He squeezed the man's shoulders gently. "I will send a raven to Lord Manderly advising of your decision in a sennight. Think on it until then," he continued before Theon could say a word, "I will not change mine, but such a change does deserve some thought on your part."

"I—" Theon's jaw clenched and then unclenched. "You would trust me near a port?"

Raising an eyebrow, Ned let his ward go. "King Robert made clear that you would have a guard, but I trust that you will do what is best for your future. You've lived long here, amongst forest and fields. What are the words of your house?"

"We Do Not Sow."

"And those words have led the Ironborn for some time now. I cannot teach you of the mindset, right or wrong, that embodies such. There is truth behind them as the Iron Islands are different from the North, greatly so. The land is less hospitable to farming, few trees still grow upon the isles." Ned stepped back, picking up an iron direwolf figure young Gendry had gifted him when he returned from the Dreadfort, a gift of thanks for allowing him a place in Winterfell. "If House Stark's words are a warning of the cold, the need to stockpile for the coming Winter, perhaps House Greyjoys are as well. A land that cannot sow facing a winter that could last a decade?"

"We would starve without—" he stopped himself before reaving could slip from his lips.

"As Lord Greyjoy," Ned told him, a small sad smile turning his lips, "you will need to make decisions that some amongst the ironmen may not like. As lord, you cannot make everyone happy, but keeping your people safe is paramount. I hope that what I've taught you will help you do so. "I hope that the Northern, Vale . . . Greenlander traits we've bestowed upon you will help you lead your people better, to work with us and not against us when winter truly comes."
"Ned," Catelyn called, relief and wariness thrumming through her voice. "Gods . . . is it true?" She had been sitting in front of the hearth, hands fiddling with one of Arya's dresses.

Ned allowed the door to shut harshly and made his way to her, feet carrying him swiftly across the room. By the time he reached her, the cloth in her hands had been set aside and she allowed him to pull her up. He buried his face in her neck, fingers threading through her hair and clasping at the back of her dress.

She returned the embrace without further questions, allowing him to seek her warmth, breath her in, and settle his nerves.

The Dreadfort. By the Old Gods and the New, this place lives up to its name.

He forced himself after a long moment to pull back, hands sliding around Catelyn until they touched her arms and, further, slid down to take her hands in his. Blue eyes watched him, scrutinized, and understood. Nearly seven and ten years they had been married and for nearly that long she had been learning to read his moods, to understand him. They said nothing as he led her to the bed and settled upon it. It took a few moments to unlace boots and his leather jerkin before they were laying back against the furs and blankets, side by side, pressed tight against one another, still mostly clothed.

The room was dark aside from the hearth and a few candles stationed at points about the room. The sun had long disappeared over the horizon, casting eerie shadows across the Dreadfort's courtyards and walkways—the room they were in was no less affected by its disappearance. A tapestry hung across from the fireplace, tame compared to some Ned had lain eyes on in the corridors, but no less celebrating the history of House Bolton. At least there were no flayed men displayed upon it.

Moments slipped past, the sounds from the courtyard outside their window slowly faded to the occasional trek of heavy boots and the call of a voice checking in. His heartbeat quieted as he focused on his wife and this moment of shared silence, trying to chase the maelstrom of worry away.

Catelyn took his hand and gently forced his fingers to splay open. Her soft lips pressed a warm, dry kiss against his palm.

"How are the girls?"

"Annoyed," Catelyn propped herself up, body fitting snug against his side, "frightened, and worried. Nymeria and Lady are with them, though, along with Jeyne and two extra guards stationed outside their rooms. I fear neither will be happy to be cooped up for long."

"We should never have brought them."

She shifted, brow tightening. "As much as I would like it, we cannot keep them hidden away forever. Was that not what you told me when I fretted over bringing them along? Over any of us coming to this wretched place?"
His jaw flexed and he drew in a ragged breath. Snagging her right hand, he slid their fingers together. "It was."

"You were right."

Ned met her eyes, startled, as she detangled her hand from his and pressed her palm against his cheek.

"Sansa will be three and ten soon," Catelyn said softly, "a maiden soon to flower and no matter how much we may loathe it, her beauty will draw suitors to Winterfell's gates. No matter what knowledge we now have of many of the men who would seek her hand, we cannot protect her forever. Neither do we have any hope of hiding Arya from the world." She pulled her knees in and pushed herself up with her left hand. "It's better they face the truth of things at our sides than alone in a strange place, none but a handmaid or sworn sword as allies."

"I should have known Roose was housing his bastard here," he said, shifting to sit up only to be stopped by her right hand planted firmly against his breast.

Since Jon's words of spies hidden amidst his household, winter town, and the North at large, Ned had been following the leads his son was able to provide. The ranks of those that would work against House Stark and northern interests had been thinned, there was no doubt of that, but in turn, the ties he cultivated were slow to grow. Some of the old spies were easy to buy, others manipulate, but with others, excuses had been made to remove them from their place.

House Manderly had just recently relieved themselves of Maester Theomore in what Ned could only wish were contrived allegations. In turn, the Maester had been sent to the Wall, landing himself at one of the smaller, recently rebuilt castles if reports were accurate. Wyman had been convinced the man and his curly blonde hair was being used by relatives in the Westerlands and there was nothing that Ned could remember from what Jon had said of the man and the time he had spent in White Harbor and amongst House Manderly to refute such a possibility.

"You cannot blame yourself for the choices of others." Catelyn shushed him before he could speak. "If Roose Bolton brought his . . . son into his home that was his choice and nothing that you were at liberty to say would have swayed his choice. Not when the Seven Kingdoms can plainly see your own legitimized bastard growing beneath your roof. No," she shook her head sharply and leaned in, blue eyes bright and slanted sharply as the edges of her lips tensed, "anything short of telling him the full truth of things would not have changed his course and you were not about to provide him knowledge of his betrayal and how he won the North for his house in dozens of lives, were you?"

He relaxed back and laid his hand over hers, pressing it against his breast. "No."

She nodded and relaxed, leaning against her elbow. "Now tell me what Castellan Maurik and the maester had to say."

Head dropping back against the soft fabric beneath his head—theirs was the best room in the castle barring the Dreadfort's family quarters—and let his eyes slide shut as words rumbled softly out of his mouth. He told of the confrontation as it had been described, the argument between Roose and his bastard about the Free Folk, small folk, and his role as a member of House Bolton. The possibility of being sent off to the Wall.

The number of poisons that had been slipped into Roose's food had her tensing as she leaned against him, eyes locked on the dwindling flames in the hearth. The additional deaths of servants and guards had her frowning deeper. Finally, as he found himself lacking any further information
to give, he trailed off, fingers twisting gently in her long auburn waves.

"They are sure he is not here? That he was the one . . . the one that organized the poison?"

"As sure as anyone can be," he confirmed. "I have our own guards making tight rounds and every servant will be questioned on the morrow." There were questions that needed to be answered, one that couldn't just be explained by castle gossip and the tales Jon told.

Why had he freed the servant girl, only to cut her down not long after?

Catelyn pressed her face against his chest, her breath puffing hot through the thin fabric of his shirt. "We cannot send the girls home now."

"No, not yet. I dare not send them alone, even with a small guard." He hesitated a moment before continuing, allowing the last bit of information he had on the matter to slip from his lips. "Maester Tybald is of the opinion that Ramsay Snow is not alone, that some of Roose's men and even some smallfolk and brigands may be sympathetic to his cause. Even aiding him."

The fire popped a little as the heat of it broke into the last near intact log. Outside their door, he heard the shuffle of boots and unintelligible words murmured as his men changed guards. There were no growls or shouts, so he dismissed it. Had a threat been present, Storm would have made a raucous where she was resting in the corridor.

"If Ramsay has truly done what has been said," Catelyn's voice was muffled slightly, "how does that bode for our relations with the wildlings?"

Word of riders nearing Winterfell reached them hours before the men were even within sight of the new wall. It was Bran who brought word of it, a quarter-hour before the newly manned gatehouse along the far wall released one of the two ravens they kept for such purposes. The young boy bounced upon his feet, near out of breath, as he interrupted a meeting Ned was having with Vayon Poole, going over the details of the current harvest and projections for the coming planting season.

"Riders, father! Bearing the sigil of House Bolton!"

His son had seen them using the eyes of a gyre falcon he and Robin had been learning to hunt with—or at least that had been the original intent. Unlike his siblings, Bran had taken swiftly to his warging ability in a manner that had him surpassing Jon's ability in swift form and outstripping even his wildling teacher, Breck. In the past few moons near any animal that he came into contact had felt his mind against their own with the exception of his siblings direwolves. His guard spent much of their time hovering over Bran's white-eyed form as he sat in odd locations, often pausing mid-play. It worried Ned, how quickly Bran's skill was growing.

Outside of Jon's connection with Winter, Arya was the only other one of his children that had shown any ability with warging outside of her direwolf. There was a barn cat, scarred and missing half an ear, that followed her about and could sometimes be found slipping through the castle's corridors or along the walls, normally brown-gold eyes tinted grey.

It was not a royal greeting by any standards, the entire household had no need to be waiting about in the courtyard, but by the time the first horses trotted through Winterfell's gates a formal greeting had been arranged. Ned, his wife, children, and the senior members of his household standing in wait. The first riders through the gate were familiar, guards Ned had sent personally to
await Domeric's arrival at Moat Cailin. The entire entourage was perhaps fifty strong, mostly made of House Stark and House Redfort, or at least should have been. Near half of the men streaming through his gates bore another sigil, the spiked crown and crossed axes of House Dustin and along with the personal sigil of Lady Barbrey Dustin held high.

A stone settled at the bottom of his stomach as Ned's eyes landed on the Lady of Barrowtown riding beside the young man that could be none other than the new Lord Bolton. In the years since he delivered her husband's horse to her after the rebellion, Ned had kept a respectful distance between them, at least until recently. She was and still remained, the bannerman he most loathed to be placed in a room alone with.

No love was lost between them, especially not when he failed to bring her husband or his bones North. In truth, however, the relationship between her and House Stark had been strained long before that. Ned hadn't known of it until after the war, but from what Benjen described of Brandon's antics she had been one of Brandon's conquest, half or more in love with the man and other whispers told of the quiet rage that had grown upon hearing of Brandon's betrothal to Catelyn.

The tight press of her lips together as she drew her horse up and laid eyes upon his family and the near completely black attire she wore confirmed to him the grudge simmered still.

Beside her rode her nephew and the family resemblance, though not quite stunning, was readily apparent. His hair was dark, but not as dark as the Leach Lords had been, perhaps brightened by time spent in the sun training or the natural brown of his mothers shining through the inky black. Domeric was clean-shaven, but his skin wasn't quite as pallid as his fathers had been. He wore the flayed man proudly, his doublet crimson edged with pink.

Domeric dismounted quicker than his lady aunt, stepping forward to kneel before the stableboy had more than a light grasp of the horse's reins.

"Lord Stark."

"Welcome to Winterfell, Lord Bolton," Ned acknowledge the young man with a nod, eyes slanting to Barbrey as she moved to stand beside her nephew. "Lady Dustin."

She swept her skirts into a curtsey, barely more than a cursory movement. "My lord."

Beside him, Catelyn squared her shoulders, chin lifting slightly.

"It is my pleasure to be here, my lord," Domeric said softly as he stood, his pale blue eyes dancing from Ned to his lady wife and each of his children and back again. "I only wish it had been under better circumstances."

Ned nodded sharply. "As do I, Lord Domeric."

"I wanted to thank you for what you did for my household in our time of need," Domeric continued, ignoring the look Lady Dustin sent his way, "and for making sure arrangements were made to properly care for my lord father's burial."

"I fostered in the Vale as a boy and know just how difficult travel can be at times."

"Still," the young lord cleared his throat. His eyes slid over the group arrayed and he nodded to himself, drew his sword, and fell to his knees once more, the tip of the sword cutting into the ground.
Ned blinked, shoulders straightening. Nearby he could see Jory and another guard had taken abortive steps forward, hands on the hilt of their swords. They paused once it was clear the young lord’s actions held no threat.

"To Winterfell, I pledge the might of the Dreadfort. Hearth, harvest, and men I yield up to you, my lord. Our swords, knives, spears, and arrows are yours to command. Grant mercy to our weak, help to our helpless, and justice to all, and House Bolton shall never fail you." Domeric's pale eyes locked with Ned's grey as he spoke, voice firm and lyrical, telling of his skill with the harp. "I swear by earth and water, by bronze and iron, by blood and bile, by ice and fire."

The words ran over him, startling, but no different than the words the man's lord father had spoken to him once before, when the northern lords swore fealty to Ned as Lord of Winterfell on the eve of battle to avenge their murdered lord in the South. The oath was an old one, a tradition of the North. Its words changed little from house to house, but there were always small differences derived from the history of each.

Stepping forward, he accepted the oath loud and firm, his voice carrying throughout the courtyard. Once Domeric stood and sheathed his sword, Ned grasped his arm in welcome and introduced each of his present children, from Robb to little Rickon clinging to his mother's skirts. Though Lady Barbrey was no less polite than her nephew, the warmth Domeric displayed as he greeted the younger Starks far surpassed her and eased something inside him.

Ned couldn't help but be amused and worried in turn, the emotions warring within him at the sight of the light blush arise to the boy's cheeks when he greeted Sansa, his eyes trying not to stare for too long at her. The same pale eyes flicked in his direction more than once.

Domeric was not the man Jon described Ramsay Snow to be, nor was his three and ten-year-old daughter ready for a betrothal to any man. No matter the House or how well thought of he was by every lord and lady Ned had requested word of the boy from. By all accounts, the new Lord Bolton was as different from his father as the sun from the moon.

All the same, Ned couldn't help but think about adding a second guard to follow his daughters about. The memory of Jon's voice choking as he tried to describe Sansa's treatment at the hands of that monster . . . of the mutilation he had inflicted upon her and others . . .

He forced the thoughts away. Domeric Bolton was not his half brother, just as he himself was not Brandon and Rhaella Targaryen had been, by all accounts, nothing like her brother Aerys.

Sansa blushed prettily as a kiss was pressed upon her hand, a sight that had Arya wrinkling her nose and Robb stepping in to distract Domeric lest he try the same with the dark-haired girl.

Lord Bolton should only be in Winterfell a sennight, perhaps less, before his duties would take him to his own seat. Ned was glad of it, for all that he wanted to get to know the man in person and not just from words inked upon slips of parchment, he would feel much better knowing that the Bolton lands were in the hands of a trueborn Bolton raised with the mores of the Vale. His mere presence should be enough to sway most of House Bolton's bannermen against any thought of siding with the still at large Ramsay Snow.

Chapter End Notes

The oath Domeric gives is adapted straight from the one Meera and Jojen say to Bran
in the books.
Early Autumn Part I

Chapter Notes

The below does not mean the characters appear in this section, but are for reference. Most ages are based on DOB in the books. A couple are updated for my purposes or weren't clear in the year of birth.

Approximate ages at the start of Autumn ( +/- 1/2 to 1 year in some cases):

Joffrey: 13 1/2 - Myrcella: 9 1/2 - Tommen: 8 1/2 - Ygritte: 19

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Lord Snow. You bringing me back for trial? We had a good thing here. We were free men. You'll never be free. You'll never know what that's like.”
Karl Tanner

He breathed deep, cool air filling his lungs and biting at the roof of his mouth. He could see fog in the distance, spreading from the northern horizon towards where their army waited, what was left of it. Any castle between here and the remnants of the Wall had been fortified, lords, ladies, knights, and small folk alike taking cover behind the thickest walls or sailing to sea, to Essos, the Summer Isles, even to the nearly completely unknown shores of Sothoryos. Few ships remained long term at the ports, most docking only for short periods after being assured that the living still manned the ports and city walls.

With icebergs making traversing Narrow Sea a traitorous endeavor for even the best of sailors, fewer and fewer braved the trip. Supplies were dwindling, the bit that remained was coming up from Dorne or taken by Yara’s ironmen. Say what you will about them, the Iron fleet had proved its metal and courage to take supplies to ports, risking life and limb to help stave off greater loss of life within the people they once sought to reave and rape.

“They're coming,” Daenerys’ voice was soft, but a puff of air that barely carried to him.

Jon glanced aside to her, taking in her appearance. The Queen was clothed in the warmest fur and toughest armor she owned, her silver hair hidden beneath dark knitted wool and leather. If it weren’t for the hints of red, he might have mistaken her for one of his black brothers, long dead and buried but for just a handful. Dead when the Free Folk attacked the Wall, when the Others
pressed forward and picked them off the best they could, when stabbing betrayal found them, and when the Wall they were sworn to protect broke to pieces and crashed, melting as the magic that once sealed it broke.

The Wall had fallen and the strength of it had shaken the earth for hundreds of miles. Now, few pieces of it remained no matter how many storms covered the land in fresh snow and ice. It had melted away, faded into memory along with the magic that had held it high for thousands of years. The only reminders of its once existence was the barren strip of land and rubble of the old castles that had sat behind it. Broken bits of war machines that had lined the battlements.

She glanced to him, violet eyes full of worry and resignation. This was her kingdom, fought for with fire and blood on the edge of falling apart. Daenerys had sought her crown and won it, but now it all seemed for naught.

It was a feeling Jon knew well; he’d felt it, time and again.

“*That they are,*” he agreed, fingers gripping the pommel of his sword, feeling the shape of the wolf head even through his gloves. Behind him, he heard exclamations as the nearby waterway, already edged with ice, began to freeze. It cracked loudly, and frost coated the sand around them. “*Hold steady!*” he ordered, voice carrying, his order being relayed in echoes throughout the ranks. Only part of the army was here. They were volunteers mostly, the most loyal, men and women without families—ones who had already lost their families—those with nothing to lose. A few alchemists were nearby, archers lining the beach behind them.

Reaching up, Daenerys removed her hat and slowly tied the whole of her hair, the free sections and the intricate braids, back with a crimson cord. As she dropped her hands, she looked at Jon, lips set in a thin line. “*If I die—*”

“If you die Sansa will raise Aegon beside Robbard,” he assured her. The Dragon Queen had given birth to her son just moons ago, a fortnight after Sansa had birthed a son herself. They were in Sunspear now, Sansa along with a wetnurse caring for both babes. “*Just as she promised, and Missandei will be there at her side to tell him of his mother.*”

Daenerys nodded sharply, the muscle in her cheeks flexing as she turned to look back towards the north. Flashes of green flame met them as archers in hastily built towers set alight cashes of wildfire as the army of undead drew closer. It was an attempt to heard them, for all that they were herding themselves.

In the distance, a line of fire flashed across the sky in front of the fog as Viserion, ridden by Tyrion, signaled the presence of the Night King. The gold dragon whirled and headed back towards them; Jon’s eyes followed it until he figured there was enough distance between it and the undead army.

“We should go,” he said, turning to where Rhaegal was waiting, laying upon the sand, not waiting for his aunt to speak. A ring of earth bereft of frost encircled him and he puffed out a breath of hot hair as Jon climbed upon his back and chained himself into his saddle.

He paused then, reaching inward and letting his mind drift.

*He could feel the chill even through his thick fur as he sidled up next to the little sister. His sister, last sibling, stood at her side, head near even with the little sister’s shoulder. They were all standing, looking across the water as it froze so sharply that the lap of waves had no time to even out, cracks formed as water displaced and pushed up at the sections mid-freeze.*
Letting out a growl, he looked up at the little sister, meeting her grey eyes. She smiled grimly at him and sighed. Nodded.

“My lady?” the tired faced, short man behind her inquired. The dense scent of bog and the cloying scent of the pale trees the two-legged ones knelt for permeated his clothes and skin.

“It’s time,” she said, glancing over at the men and women, the rest of the army as the water stopped lapping upon the beach, freezing solid and pressing up at the sand. “Bran, by the Gods I hope you’re watching. If you fell asleep in the Godswood I swear I—”

“Wolf. Wolf.” A crow swooped out of a tree, wings tinged with frost as it alighted nearby, swooping in front of her and barely missed being snapped at by his sister’s jaws.

His sister growled, low and deep as she bared her teeth at the bird. The growl was followed by a chorus that spread through the forest behind them. His sisters pack followed closely at her heels in all things. He had but an honorary position—they respected his size, his teeth, his claws.

The little sister nodded, smiling grimly. “All right then,” she said, glancing down at him. He looked up at her, watching as her hardened features softened, ever so slightly. “We’ll be ready, Jon. What little good we might do should you fall, we’ll be ready.”

The sky was beginning to darken, clear blue giving way to dusk grey with but a splash of color across the distant horizon. The air that whipped around him was cold, occasionally biting at the skin of his cheeks, but mostly just a familiar chill. Far beneath them, as they passed over woods and hills, stone towers were being rebuilt, standing sentry. Small groups of men and women—barely dots to his vision—toiled hard.

Jon leaned forward in the saddle Mikken had worked with the saddler to design and craft. They had based it upon the descriptions in the book Maester Aemon had lent him, and those within Winterfell’s own library. It had taken some trial and error, and the occasional bought of discomfort at the feel of loops, buckles, and chains against Winter’s scales, but the end result was better than any saddle Rhaegal or Viserion had ever allowed upon their backs for him.

The make of it also allowed his family to breath easily, at least in the fact Jon wouldn’t be falling off. It had taken him some time to get used to the near non-existent slack of the chain as he leaned into Winter’s flowing movements, but he had.

A small fire blazed far below, a bit large to be a campfire, and he gripped the spines growing thick along his dragon’s back. They were the darkest part of her, midnight blue at the base that faded to a silver-white at the tip. Jon had found himself very glad that the spines didn’t end in true points, else he might have found himself moving on from this life a few times.

Winter banked, sweeping lower, and he found himself sharing her sight for just a moment. It was not a campfire, but a pyre. A wrinkled corpse laid upon it and a group of what looked to be Free Folk were working nearby. One man watched the fire, tending to it, as the others skinned a boar and made camp.

Old age or illness, then, not Ramsay and not likely to be causing the trouble we’re looking for.
They made another pass over the woods, keeping an eye out for any sign of the brigands rumored to have been in the area, harassing the builders, farmers, and free folk working and living in this region. The attacks had been getting worse and the locations more varied, what had started out upon Bolton lands had quickly dispersed and moved further north and west not long after Domeric took control of the Dreadfort.

Say what one will about House Bolton, Domeric Bolton held his lands firmly, allowing none of his men to break the North’s laws and the agreements made with the Free Folk. In the six moons since swearing fealty more than two dozen men—peasants and bannermen alike—had taken the black or lost their lives or manhood to his sword. He ruled hard, but clear, not brokering the silent suffering amongst his people that his lord father had allowed.

Even still, Domeric was an enigma to Jon—a man he had but once past the age of true childhood, in this life and no other—a person he had no experience with. He looked little like his bastard brother, and his mannerisms at times reminded Jon more of Vale knights than Roose Bolton and his ilk.

This change of affairs had startled him, upon his return to the North. It hadn’t been one Jon had prepared for or discussed with his father. They had discussed Ramsay, of course, and what might be done with. Along with that came securing Domeric’s life and preventing his half-brother from slipping poison into his drink had been near the top of it.

But Jon had never thought Ramsay might kill his father, not so soon and with the North so strong.

Jon cast his gaze towards the horizon again and sighed. “All right,” he said, the words lost to the wind. Winter didn’t need to hear him though, not physically. “Time to head home, girl.”

Winter’s head tilted towards him enough that her golden eye, edged with crimson stared back at him for a moment. Her pupils were wide, taking in as much of the waning light as possible. Jon sense her inquiry and sighed.

“You may be able to see well in the dark, but I cannot,” he murmured, leaning forward in the saddle, hand sliding from the spine to smooth over pale scales. “I need to rest, as do you, no matter that you might be able to fly for hours yet there is no need. We cannot truly differentiate from friend and foe at night.”

She chuffed, smoke curled quickly past him in the air, and she swerved to the right, swooping back towards Winterfell in a long arc.

By the time he spotted the castle in the distance, stars were beginning to crowd the sky from east to west. Only the slightest hint of deep blue remained on the western horizon. As they neared, something caught Winter’s attention and he felt the low rumble vibrate through his body as she vocalized. She veered slightly, dropping down closer to the tops of the trees and towards the first rows of autumn crops, about a moon away from harvest and the frames that had been erected for two more glass gardens outside Winterfell’s high walls.

One of the recently finished gates in the new guard wall was still open, a caravan trailing slowly through, carts filled with rocks from a nearby quarry pulled by mammoths, a giant leading them. The guard tower was the highest and best fortified as it faced the King’s Road. Jon chuckled softly under his breath.

“No.” Jon shook his head, smile tugging at his lips. He pat her warm scales. “You know the rules, mammoths are not to be messed with. ‘Sides there’s a nice steer waiting for you at home. You won’t have to worry about those tusks or giant arrows when roasting it either.”
There was a flash of disappointment as she glided past the gate, flapped to gain altitude, and continue home. He wasn’t above humoring at times—she had a taste for porpoise and smaller whales now—but Winter wasn’t allowed free reign to take her fill of anything. There were rules instilled from the moment she’d hatched and much like Ghost she followed them well.

It didn’t take long, mere minutes for Winter to reach the highest walls of Winterfell, her curiosity assuaged for now. Braziers lit the walls of the castle and the main streets of winter town as they flew over, towards the Godswood.

There were three acres held within the castle’s walls dedicated to the Godwood and at the edge of it was a newly completed building that had begun construction before Jon left for Braavos. It was simple, but sturdy, and much better than the hastily constructed barn Winter had stayed within just before they left or the remains of the broken tower.

Half as tall as the broken tower, it was built to house Winter. It wasn’t a prison meant to keep her within its auspices, instead it was designed simply to shelter her and the armor and saddle she wore. Not only did it gain height from its stone and wood walls, but the center of it had also been dug down a bit.

While it wouldn’t work forever, for now it was good enough and the space had earned Winter’s approval quickly when flurries of autumn snow had fluttered down just days after construction had been completed.

Winter landed heavily in front of the buildings open doors, in a small clearing where trees had been cut away just for this purpose. Her claws sunk into the damp earth, a reminder of the nearby hot spring that flowed into a pool just feet away between the trees before ducking back beneath the ground. The trees were sparse in this part of the wood, just far enough apart that once Jon had dismounted and unbuckled the saddle, the dragon squeezed through the trees to settle within the warm water.

“Several people have come looking for you,” Luca informed him, watching as he attempted to balance the large saddle without dragging any bit of it upon the ground, “including this one.”

Jon smiled as he caught sight of Rickon standing next to Shaggydog, covered in mud from foot to thigh. “Where’s Amos, lil’Red?” he asked, brow raised.

Rickon shrugged, glancing at Luca out of the corner of his eye. The guard shared a look with Jon. “Want to help me put this away?”

His brother bit his lip and glanced towards where Winter had disappeared into the shadows. There were only two braziers lighting the area; far enough away they had little hope of permeating the tree line.

“Winter will be along in a while,” Jon leaned the saddle onto his hip, balancing it carefully, and reached out to ruffle Rickon’s curls as he neared his youngest brother. “How long have you been out here?”

“A while,” Rickon said with a shrug, grabbing one of the straps.

The little boy followed at Jon’s heels, Shaggydog loping behind, as he put away the saddle and other gear, checking it for any damage and cleaning it with an oiled rag. His brother had long found Winter and anything to do with her fascinating, only his direwolf could dare hope to compete for attention.
“He’s been waiting perhaps half an hour,” Luca told him when Winter finally showed her face, scales slightly damp and warmer to the touch than normal. “Not terribly long. I sent Amos to clean up as he was near worse off than Rickon,” he sighed. “apparently Shaggydog got a bit carried away during the boy’s games and included him.”

Jon nodded, watching as the dragon allowed Rickon to run gentle hands over her long neck, holding as still as possible for him even while she watched him out of the corner of her eye. She had always been so good with him, gentler even than some of the direwolves, no matter how standoffish she was with other humans.

“No one came looking for him?”

“There’s been too many crows about for this time of day,” he gestured upwards, towards one of the windows high in the rafters, above a narrow walkway. The shutters were open, and Jon could barely make out a dark shape against the night sky, huddled on the sill.

“Rickon,” Jon called to his brother as the boy wrapped small hands about two of Winter’s spikes and leaned heavily against her neck. “Have you eaten yet?”

“No!” Rickon let go; his feet dropped back to the ground and he darted over with barely a glance back to Winter. The dragon moved away, curling to rest at the deepest part of the dugout. He stopped and bit his lip. “What about Winter?”

“Winter will eat in a while,” Jon snagged the boy and lifted him into the air and onto his shoulders, “right now it’s high time you and I fill our own bellies.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for sticking with me through my hiatus for Nanowrimo! <3
There were still several tables filled with food, and members of the household filtering in, by the time Jon slipped into the great hall and let his youngest brother down for the second time. They had stopped by their rooms and the bath for a quick cleaning as both had accumulated dust and dirt upon their skin and clothes—Rickon especially so with his mud caked breaches and dirt streaked skin.

“I was starting to think Bran might have to tame an owl,” Robb told him as Jon pressed Rickon forward to settle between them and winced as he sat down. Perhaps six hours sat upon Winter’s back had been too long.

“He hasn’t yet?” Jon asked, raising an eyebrow as he surveyed the platters scattered about the table.

"Not yet . . ." he paused, glancing about, "I suppose we shouldn't give him any ideas." The meal was waning having been set out over an hour past, many of the dishes lukewarm at best.

"I don't know," Jon hmmed as he pulled a plate of salted pork into reach of Rickon's questing hands, "might come in handy."

"I almost thought you were going to be gone till the morning," Robb told him, passing a jug of mead over Rickon's curls. The little boy was hunched over his plate, stuffing bits of a roll and filling his plate with portions of whatever he could reach.

Jon winced as he took the jug, the muscles of his arms ached from holding tight to Winter for hours. The jug dipped in the air, but he steadied it with his other hand, lifting himself up for a moment to ensure it made it over his little brother without spilling a drop.

"No use patrolling in the dark," he shook his head as he poured a healthy amount into his goblet, "everything sort of blends together unless I share her eyes."

"I suppose I will have to take your word for it," Robb said, tearing a small loaf of cracked bread apart to sop up juices from his stew. He slant a grin at Jon, "Unless . . . you could take me along one of these days . . ."

"I wanna fly!" Rickon chirped, mouth full.

"Rickon," Robb admonished with a sigh, eyes taking in the youngest Stark's full cheeks and messy fingers.

"One day, lil'red." Jon rolled his eyes and ruffled the boy’s hair. "Let’s not get on this again. Father barely feels comfortable with me on her back now that the saddle has been adjusted properly."

"Mikken has been working on a larger one—"

"Aye, he has, and it'll not be ready for time yet." Jon cut his brother off. "And it will take time before she's comfortable with another saddle, let alone more than one person upon her back." The weight of them also worried Jon. He had ridden beside others before, Drogon had allowed passengers behind his mother on occasion, but always when they were at least half again or more
the size Winter currently was. The more dragon blood a person had, the more apt the dragons had been to allow it as well.

"Fine," Robb exaggerated a sight, unable to suppress his smile, "but I better be the first when it is ready."

Rickon made a noise, hand slapping the table before sticky fingers tugged and Jon's sleeve.

"Sorry," Jon told him, leaning down to level his lips with the boy's ear, "but I value my life. Lady Catelyn would arrange my death if I took you up. Perhaps when you're older and taller."

He scrunched up his little face, accentuating the smattering of freckles on his nose as he considered it. Swallowing his mouthful, he asked, "When I'm five?"

"Older." Robb laughed, as did the serving girl as she picked up empty platters and bowls.

Rickon glared down at his meal, pouting as he picked apart the remainder of his roll.

Wide blue eyes stared at the mass of lord and ladies as they knelt, swearing allegiance to the King in the North. Rickon darted a look up at Jon, pale faced, as unsure how to respond to the declarations as he had been on how to properly tie the northern style clothing he had been forced into by Sansa.

Jon nodded to him, smiled encouragingly, and then pushed his own chair back so he could kneel as well, laying Dark Sister at his youngest brother's feet as Sansa knelt on the boy's—he was not even ten years old—left.

The chair skid a bit further back on the stone floor and a hand settled on Jon's shoulder.

"Chin up, lil'red," Ygritte said, voice just loud enough for those at the head of the table to hear. "You're not alone in this." Her breath teased against the side of Jon's face. "Don't show weakness, else they bite. Be a wolf."

Rickon met her eyes and opened his mouth as if to speak and then shut it, glancing over to Sansa and then back to Jon. He was shaking, ever so slightly, hands quivering, nodded, lips pressed together. His shoulders rose as he took in a deep, shuddering breath and surveyed the crowd, chin lifting.

None of them had truly wanted the title and perhaps it might prove dangerous to have such a young boy upon the northern throne, but there was no one in the South the North would dare support. Not with all the pain they had caused. It was Rickon's birthright now, as the eldest son of Eddard Stark in Winterfell since Bran remained rooted north of the Wall with the Three Eyed Raven, training his gifts.

"King in the North," Jon joined in the chant. He raised his voice, "The King in the North!"

It wasn’t long before Rickon, having mostly just picked at his food after devouring the chunks of
spiced pork and the meat in the stew Robb had insisted he place upon his plate, took off, attempting to dodge the hands of both Robb’s attempts to wipe his face and hands and the maid his lady mother had sent to capture him. The boy was just as wild as any life he lived, just tempered by his status and surroundings. Already whispers comparing him to his late Uncle Brandon slipped from visiting lords and ladies. He might have the coloring of a Tully, but his face held much of his Stark blood... wolf blood.

Jon and Robb laughed heartily, leaning back at the sight of the girl’s arms wrapping around Rickon’s waist, pulling him to a stop as she hauled his feet off the floor. The scowl on his small face caused chuckles to ripple through the few people remaining in the room.

“I think he may be worse than Arya,” Robb said after a while, shaking his head.

“Perhaps,” Jon grinned, “but don’t tell Arya.”

“Gods!” Robb ran a hand over his face, squinting his eyes shut as soft puffs of amusement fell from his lips. “She would take it as challenge.”

“That she would.”

Robb took a deep breath, settling himself and sipped from his glass. “A letter came for you.”

“A letter?” Jon sat up straight, letting his wrist settle on the table with the chunk of bread he had been about to eat.

“Yes,” Robb nodded. “Father has it in his solar. He asked me to bring you there after you were done eating if you showed for supper.”

“Do you know who sent it?” he asked, glancing down at his nearly empty plate.

“It bore a seal.”

Narrowing his eyes, Jon glared at his brother.

Robb grinned back around a mouthful.

“What seal?” he asked finally, unable to wait, a sigh escaping his lips.

“A queer one,” Robb paused to tear off another bite of bread.

Jon pressed his lips tight and eyes narrowing. For a moment he wished that, like Ghost, he could take a nip out of his brother.

“Red wax, with a half bird, half lion creature.” His hand grabbed at Jon’s arm as he made to stand. “You skipped the noon meal, brother, sit and finish your food. Pile more upon your plate,” he nodded to the platters a passing serving girl had pushed not too subtly in front of them, “and stuff yourself. The letter will still be there in an hour.”

Robb was right, and Jon knew it. In his heart, however, all he wanted to do was run across the castle and break that seal to read Aegon’s words. It was the same way he had felt in the days before the Golden Trident had finally made port at White Harbor. The same that had itched at his being as he contemplated mounting Winter and taking flight, making the distance to Winterfell in hours instead of days.

There were leagues between them, the Narrow Sea and more. No fate could befall his Targaryen
sibling that Jon would be able to affect in time for it to truly matter. Even Winter would take days to fly to wherever the Shy Maid berthed and once there he would be in little shape to lend aid. Not when he—nor Winter—was still unused to the toll long flights took on his body.

He settled in and allowed Robb to press more food upon him, filling him to the brim. His brother was right, he had been working himself hard and not pausing to rest and eat as much as he should. There was too much at stake, every year passing burned away moments that could be used preparing for the White Walkers.

It wasn’t just the Others that weighed upon his mind, either. Theon had greeted him at the Harbor, dressed in his usual fine wear, smirking and proud of his new station. The sight had startled Jon, but not as much as the news he bore.

*Ramsay fucking Snow.*

The bastard’s name had hit him like lightning on a cloudless day. The monster had killed his own father. While it wasn’t the first time he had done it, the fact he had done it so soon nearly arrested Jon’s heart. It had taken some pondering—his mind running over the details over and over until he could barely think of anything else—before he could make sense of it all.

Ramsay had been torturing wildlings, young and old, men and women. There had been so many settling across the North, small pockets of clans in some places, but mostly even smaller family groups. He had incited already grumbling men into the brunt of it: stealing through the night, numbers far greater and plans set ahead, into the homes and camps of Free Folk passing through and only days settled.

Rumors were easy to start, of the Free Folk choosing to move on, not liking the land offered for settling or the people, or of superstitions that told whispered it wasn’t the right place to settle. Few had questioned the disappearances if they were even noticed.

Even fewer had cared.

Now the monster was riding through the North, whereabouts unknown, a group of likeminded brigands and highwaymen at his back. Men who despised the idea of the Free Folk passing south of the Wall and were willing to overlook Ramsay’s nastier proclivities.

It made Jon wish he could turn into a dragon and burn them all. Made him wished he had ignored his father’s request and slipped through the tall, black and white doors in Braavos and dropped coin aplenty before the Faceless god and bid the death of House Bolton. Perhaps others as well.

*Jon breathed out, breath slipping out of his throat, as he stood upon the stone walk surrounding the House of Black and White. Behind him the pinnace that brought him pushed away.*

*Is Arya here?* he wondered, adjusting the satchel across his back.

*Ghost pressed against his side, nose shuffling against the ground, red eyes locked upon the doors.*

*It had been near three years since he last saw his little sister, days before King Robert had been due to ride through Winterfell’s gates and tear his family asunder.*

*He hadn’t waited for the fat king, had barely said a word to any of his family, before taking Ghost*
and riding to White Harbor to board the nearest ship. It had been the first, perhaps, of a series of mistakes that he was floundering to dig himself out of ever since.

The door opened before he reached it the tall white door opened. A dark-skinned man stood there in the hooded garb that denoted experienced assassins within the temples halls. He stared at Jon, brown eyes trailing over his person, down to Ghost, and then back up to his face.

“A man seeks the assistance of the Many Faced God,” Jon said, voice still rough from disuse. There had been little cause for him to use it in the past year and he had not been much for talking even before that.

The man tilted his head and there was a long pause. “A man brings items of great worth to barter.”

Jon blinked, hand wrapping tight about the strings securing the bag that held what little he owned. He nodded sharply. “A man does.”

The disciple backed away, holding the door open for him and Ghost to pass.

Stepping through, Jon surveyed the hall as he waited for his eyes to fully adjust to the dimmer firelight within.

He followed the man for several minutes, until they entered a waiting area, a pool of water near the center. Pulling the satchel from his back, Jon held it at his front.

“Does a man truly wish to give away such things?”

“No,” Jon turned to greet a new man. This one bore a face he knew: Jaquen Hagar. “A man wishes to sell them.”

“Let a man see.”

Setting the bag upon the ground, he untied and opened it. He shuffled his extra set of clothes aside and took the dragon eggs out, one at a time.


The eggs were near cold to the touch, barely a spark of warmth within their shells. They had been like this since the day their mother died, sword pushed through her swelling belly and the babe within by her mad brother.

Viserys was dead now, too. Drogo had seen to it before Jon could.

“Such things could buy a man an army.”

“A man doesn’t need an army.” Jon raised his eyes, meeting Jaquens. “He just needs a few good men to cross names off a very long list.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay. My muse and brain were simultaneously not cooperating. I’ve mostly worked out the remaining kinks from Early Autumn. I also have an entire week
off starting today so other than house work (spring cleaning) I'll probably write a lot because I randomly requested it when work sent around the time off calendar for 2018 in November and never actually planned anything, though I may drive cross state to visit family for a couple days next weekend.

I apologize for my rant on Star Wars: TLJ recently. But yeah. As a long time fan who enjoyed Star Wars (and Legends) for the story telling, characters, and world building the movie pissed me off. If you want to know why, I suggest watching: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vw7pcCj0ORk&t=28s if you want to know why as he covers most of my issues with it so far in this series of video. But yeah. That movie caused my brain issues and side tracked me majorly as I binged a shit ton of EU/Legends materials and star wars fics (and the OT and Clone Wars cartoon).
Early Autumn Part III

Chapter Notes

Life sucks at times. Also Microsoft Word made it impossible to copy and paste from a word doc when my subscription ran out and I was too lazy to figure out a way around it. Been six months, sorry.

Before making their way up to their father’s solar, Robb and Jon detoured back to the godswood, Ghost and Grey Wind at their heels after returning from a hunt, to feed Winter her steer. The sight of it was amazing to behold, though it still turned Jon’s stomach a bit sometimes. The way she slunk out of the woods and the shallow hot springs, scales glistening and steaming in the flickering light. It was in those moments the reality of Winter’s existence as a predator above all others sunk into his skin and shivered in his bones.

Her movement was contained, claws and wings carefully taken care of as she slipped through the brush and readied herself, fangs slowly becoming visible. The wave of heat was oddly comforting, for him at least. Robb stood farther back, closer to the structure than the steers that had been set in the middle of the small clearing, staked in place with a chain attached to a thin rope halter. The scent of burnt hair was the worst; as hit rose in the air Jon stepped back towards his brother, to avoid the bulk of the smoke that twisted through the air.

The first time witnessing such a thing Robb had lost his dinner and Jon couldn’t blame him. It had taken lives for Jon to become inured to the sight himself. The scent of men burning, dead or not, was one he had known since far too early his first life. The sight of it, however, had taken many lives to lose the twitch of muscle around his eyes.

In his first life, when watching the dead burn in droves, Jon had focused on the satisfaction of defeating his foes and turning back the army of the dead. In subsequent lives he had been faced with more and more living dying by fire. A headlong rush into battle for King’s Landing had resulted in the entire sitting burning in a bright green rush of wildfire. He had stood at Daenerys’ side, unable to sway her decision to burn masters that might have been working against her; jaw clenched, and lips pressed tight.

He would never allow Winter to taste fresh human flesh. Not unless there was no other option.

Jon could only think of one exception that he would make.

The door to their father’s solar was open when they arrived; the logs in the hearth having been burning for some time, already halfway to embers. Across the room, one of the shutters was open, allowing fresh air to cool the room a bit. A chair was angled in front of the fire, a doublet half sewn, pale grey embroidery glistening upon it.

As Robb shut the door behind them, Jon cross the room and moved the doublet aside, gently setting it upon a small basket of yarn, thread, and other odds and ends, careful not to pull or tangle the thread dangling from it. A squeal of outrage echoed in his mind; a lecture from long ago. Lip twitching, he straightened and grabbed the carved back of the chair, fingers pressing against the polished wood grooves of running wolves. Allowing the Stark heir to take the seat already across the desk from Ned, Jon pulled the other chair over to set beside his brother.
“Did we receive word from East Watch yet?” Robb asked, picking up a ledger as Ned handed Jon the still sealed letter.

“Aye,” their lord father said, leaning back, one hand reaching out he tapped a pile of parchment. “The second shipment of dragonglass arrived without issue, a whole hold full of it. The next should arrive—”

Jon drowned out the rest of the conversation as he carefully broke the seal, opening the letter. It wasn’t terribly long or detailed, but the cords gripping his insides unraveled quickly at the words inked across the page.

*Jon,*

_I wanted to thank you for the words of advice your provided at our meeting those months past. They have been most helpful on multiple accounts and the business ventures I have since embarked on have begun to bear fruit. By the time you receive this missive, I should be arriving in the city of Braavos—if not gone from there already. Sadly, my friends and colleagues advised against a trip to Westeros at this time, though I so would love to lay eyes upon Winterfell. I hope to see it before the roads from White Harbor become impassable in the years to come. Your description of it was simply breathtaking.*

_Still, there is much for me to do here. I have decided on a course of action I hope will allow me to visit and see the lands my father called home. At times it seems but a fantasy, a dream that could never come to pass, but your words have brought me faith. Faith that has only grown since I found a rare lizard said to bring good luck in the days before embarking on my current business endeavors. He is utterly gorgeous, breathtaking, a deep red with hints of orange and gold. There is a black beneath his scales as well, but it is barely noticeable to the undiscerning eye.*

_It is my wish that you may see him soon._

_I wish your family well in your preparations for the harvest and the coming Winter._

_Until we meet again,_

_Griff_

A small smile graced Jon's lips, growing every so slightly until he folded the thin paper and slipped it into a pocket.

“I received a letter from him as well,” Ned said after the discussion of dragonglass had waned and they realized Jon had finished reading the letter thrice through, “and another from Jon Connington.”

“Did he curse you?” The moment the words slipped from his mouth, Jon winced. “Lord Connington was rather . . . unsettled with my existence and Ae-Griff’s reaction to my words.” _And his attachment to me._

“Between the lines, perhaps,” Ned shook his head and handed the other letters over for him to
They were nearly as subtle as the letter Jon had received, worded carefully, but it was the letter from the exiled lord that had his eyebrows rising. He groaned and rubbed at his temple. When he had relayed his thoughts and memories to Aegon, perhaps he should have been a bit less clear on a few points.

Robb reached over and took the letters, eyes scanning the pages quickly. “What is he planning to do with half a dozen sellsword companies?” he asked, brow furrowed and nose wrinkling a bit.

“He suppose plans to make a name for himself.”

“I understood that.” Robb snorted as he dropped the letter upon the desk, lips pressing together.

“How much did you tell him?”

Jon glanced up at his father. “I told him the truth . . .” he winced and ran a hand through his curls. “Told him about his campaigns, how he relied on Daenerys’ soldiers in addition to the Golden Company.”

“And his name.” Ned sighed.

“And his name,” Jon confirmed.

“So, he is planning to . . . do what, take over Slaver’s bay as Daenerys did?” Robb asked.

Her rather consistent bid to free those collared and trodden over by Essos’ slave masters had endeared Daenerys to Robb. The red head had been sorely disappointed to hear that, more oft than not, by the time she began her campaign he was embroiled in war that too often stole his life no matter what Jon tried to do.

“Something akin to it, I think.” Jon sighed, leaning back, pressing his aching spine against the curve of the chair. If they didn’t take too long tonight, he might be able to spend time in the baths tonight to help prevent the inevitable ache that would besiege him worse tomorrow. He was looking forward to the day his body grew as used to flight as trading blows with his sword.

A light flutter of wings interrupted them, and Jon caught sight of a crow alighting on the window sill.

“Bran!” Ned barked without hesitation and the bird flew off immediately, disappearing into the dark. He took a breath and shook his head. “Sometimes I curse that the Gods gifted us these abilities.”

“Be thankful Bran didn’t hear Robb’s suggestion he find an owl.” Jon grinned as Robb groaned.

“I will be,” Ned said, hand curling into a fist as he darted a look at his eldest. He paused, then eyes glancing towards the window and then back down to a pile of papers with rough edges, some stained or torn at the edges, on his desk. “For now, at least.”

“I told Jon that it could be a good thing.” Robb grinned slightly, standing to retrieve a pitcher from a small table nearby and some cups. “We could have him scout the forest for enemies at night. Maester Luwin and Breck both agree owls have better eyes at night than hawks and crows.”

“Whether they do or not, Bran doesn’t need to spend more time slipping his skin than he already does,” Jon pointed out, taking a proffered glass. He sipped the ale within slowly, enjoying the
warm burn of it.

Ned waved away the offer of a drink. “Every warg I have conferred with all agree that it won’t matter how long he waits. Considering his strength, he’ll be able to bond with animals for years to come. However, I would prefer if we can hold off on slipping that idea to him for now.” He paused, waiting until Jon lifted his eyes to meet his gaze. “I am more worried about his other abilities. He’s been having more dreams.”

Green dreams. Glimpses of the present, the past, and, on rare occasions, possible futures. Like the dreams Jon claimed to have when necessity reared its head.

“How long do you think we have?” Ned asked, voice quiet.

He sighed and dropped his gaze to the calm surface of the alcohol in his cup. Moving his hand gently, he caused the liquid to swirl and lap up the inside of the glass. “I’m not sure.” Jon set the cup down. “He is stronger than usual, better trained. Bran rarely made his way to Blood Raven with more than a tentative knowledge of warging. He could slip into Summer easily enough and Hodor when he had to.”

Hodor. Willis. The man had seen no change in behavior in this life. The blurred mantra still replaced every word that would have slipped past his lips.

Blood Raven was always careful to ensure Bran made it to him, no matter the mess Jon may have caused mucking things up. Hodor was essential to Bran’s plight. His was a fate Jon wished he could change, but seemed set in stone before Ghost was ever born—perhaps before Jon was.

“It’s early yet, though, isn’t it?” Robb asked, glancing towards the locked cupboard that held pages recording Jon’s words. “At least compared to any other life. He has never gone north this early, has he?”

“Never before King Robert’s death,” Jon agreed. This early was too subjective in meaning. Ghost was usually born when Jon was about four and ten or six and ten, yet here he had been born when Jon was but two and ten. Two years earlier and yet four years and some moons past Jon Arryn still lived and the royal household held no interest in trekking across Westeros to set foot in the barbaric North.

If all goes well, they may never have cause to.

“Has he shared any of his dreams with you, father?”

“A few.” Ned nodded, and, after a momentary pause, he leaned forward and took the empty cup Robb had set aside and filled it with Ale. “He spends much of the dreams wandering Winterfell’s courtyards and the crypts.”

“Chasing birds?” Jon asked.

“Sometimes.” He nodded and then paused to drink. “Other times the wolves,” Ned glanced at him, the rim of his cup just beneath his lips, “or you.”

“Me?” He sat up straight, ignoring the pull of his muscles.

“Aye,” his father nodded, face solemn. “You. Winter, too. He told me he catches you within the godswood, settled beneath the Heart Tree, Winter curled in the hot springs and Ghost at your side as you polish a sword upon your lap.”
“Like you do,” Robb murmured, glancing over to where all three of their wolves had curled in front of the hearth. They took up much of the room now, Grey Wind and Ghost nearing the size of their mother. “With Ice.”

Ned nodded, but didn’t say more.

He didn’t have to say the words, but Jon could read it on his face. The number of times Jon had wielded Ice longer than a practice bout or a single short skirmish could be numbered on one hand. Greatswords had never been a favorite of his, he much preferred a bastard or longsword in his grasp.

“If he can wait, I would like to fly him north once Winter is large enough to carry at least four men and supplies along with armor laced with dragonglass and runes of the first men. The Heart Tree the Three Eyed Raven calls home is farther north than any of the remaining Free Folk clans we know of,” Jon ignored Robb’s frown of confusion. The armor was more guesswork than anything else—they had never had the time and supplies to attempt making it for Daenerys’ children. Much like the attempts at forging Valyrian steel the blacksmiths were attempting a few times a fortnight. “I dare not take her too far north now.” *Especially now that Craster’s Keep had been cleared out.* A contingent of Northmen and Free Folk had finally done what the Watch wavered on, ridding the world of the man and freeing his daughter-wives. *The Others can’t be happy to have lost a supply of babes.*

It was an action that had been taken none too soon. Jon only wished he had been able to cause Craster’s end sooner, leaving the women there had been a decision he always hated making. This time the decision had been taken from him, weighed, and decided with great care.

Taking away the gift of Castor’s sons had led to more sightings Walker’s in areas they hadn’t been before. That worried him, but he was also glad to know that, more than likely, Gilly and her sisters were alive and well south of the Wall.

Hopefully his other friends—Tormund, Val . . . Ygritte—were too.
It never got old, the sound of practice swords clacking away. For some reason, no matter what he had witnessed, swordplay always put him at ease. Even in the heat of battle he could find a focus, a resolve, that kept him calm. Even when rage burned beneath his skin when his fingers gripped the hilt of a sword everything fell away but the moment and the dance.

Jon spun, stepped aside, and twisted his blade, bringing it to plant a light blow against Gendry’s inner thigh. Just hard enough to bruise. It caused Gendry to lose his footing and stumble to the side.

“I yield,” the blacksmith called out, letting the tip of his sword to drop to the dirt to support his weight. He was breathing harshly, mouth open to suck in blessed air. “Don’t say it.”

“There is no yielding in a fight, Gendry!” Robin called out from the side of the ring. He and Bran were sitting atop a short fence built to keep spars contained when men let their fight take hold and their feet move with instinct and not thought.

Gendry glanced over his shoulder at the little lord, barely refraining from rolling his eyes.

Jon laughed, dropping his sword to his side and rolling his shoulders. “I didn’t have to. You already know it.”

“I did,” he grumbled and winced, rubbing at the bruise that was sure to be blossoming, “perhaps it’s time you beat some sense into Lord Robin since he knows it as well.”

“Perhaps it is,” Jon glanced over to the younger boys, “go catch your breath.”

He nodded and stumbled towards where the boys sat. His skill with a sword was growing, anyone could see that, but Jon had a feeling a warhammer would be more at home in his hands even now. Both of Robert Baratheon’s bastards housed within Winterfell had been set to learning swordsmanship, but Mikken had his apprentice learning more than that.

“A good blacksmith knows how to handle the weapons he makes, at least enough to ensure the quality and balance without relying on the word of others.”

Gendry oft ran himself ragged from dusk till dark unless he was dragged off to take a break—usually by Jon or Arya, occasionally Robb—trying to learn as much as he could. Jon didn’t dare suggest he slow himself down, but watched carefully and provided words of encouragement when needed.

“Are you ready, Robin?” Jon asked, watching as the boy’s brown eyes widened. “You as well, Bran.” His younger brother blinked, eyes focusing again. “If you want to be a knight one day, you can’t rely just on birds and wolves to beat your enemies.”

Becoming a knight was still Bran’s dream, though he didn’t speak of it as much since learning he could slip into animals other than his direwolf.

They gathered their gear and stepped forward, frowning as Jon sheathed his sword. “We’ll start with the basics. If you can run through the footwork without stumbling, I’ll let you try and hit me.”
Small noses wrinkled and him, but he just grinned and motioned for them to start.

It was startling, watching them move through motions that he had long ago memorized, just how much they had changed. Especially SweetRobin. The last time Jon had seen the boy before he came north to Moat Cailin with his family in the life, the young lord had been a pale shadow of this child.

The Robert Arryn Jon had always known had been spoiled and loud, crowing demands and crying when he didn’t get his way. Saying he had a habit of whining would have been an understatement.

“Mother,” Robin frowned staring down at them from upon his mother’s lap, “what is a bastard?”

Lady Lysa glared down at him, running a hand over her son’s dark hair. A scowl split her lip. “They are horrible creatures, born of lust and filled with greed and jealousy.

His nose wrinkled with distaste and he looked up at his mother. “Can we throw it through the moon door?”

Sansa grabbed his hand, gripping it harshly, tensing beside him.

He gripped back, just as tight. They had made it this far, had run from King’s Landing in the chaos of Stannis’ attack on Blackwater Bay. Jon hoped their decision to seek shelter amongst Sansa’s kin had been the right one.

“We can not just throw people through the moon door, sweetling,” Lysa told her son, remorse dripping from her words as she cupped his cheek. She cooed at him when he pouted. “You have to hold a trial first.” Her eyes lifted, locking once more on Jon.

They were Tully eyes, as bright blue as any of his siblings’ and just like her sister Catelyn’s, only these were narrow fissures dark with emotion that his aunt had never mustered up to spare him. A shiver ran down his spine.

“My sister never liked you.”

Jon winced at the words. No, she hadn’t. Now that she was dead she would never have a chance to either.

“My mother was upset with my lord father over his infidelity and it colored her opinion of Jon, but he’s always been a brother to me,” Sansa spoke swiftly, taking a step forward, placing herself in an angle in front of him, “and to all my siblings. He’s family.”

“And yet a bastard,” Lysa Arryn waved her niece to silence. “I received an interesting letter from King’s Landing not long ago. Tell me Jon,” her nose wrinkled in disgust at the name, “Snow. Who was it that slit Petyr Baelish’s throat?”

The air caught in his throat, and he swallowed thickly.

Coming here had been a horrible idea.
No matter the progress he had made, Bran still had an edge on Robin. They had the basics down, beginner stances and footwork fairly stable, but there was still a gap in physical strength that the heir to the Vale had yet to overcome. The first time Jon had seen the boy practice, under the patient auspices of Ser Rodrick, just watching had been painful. Robin had thrown a fit, crying and tossing his sword at the knight when forced to repeat movements again and again instead of slashing wildly through the air. The knight had been the one to search out Jon and request he lend a hand in curbing the behavior, and the two of them had worked on it with occasional help from Ned, Robb, and Ser Jory.

The first few moons they had been very careful not to involve too many guards or men of lower birth amongst his teachers, simply to avoid any additional conflict should his tantrums find sympathetic ears amongst those he dictated letters to—especially his mother. Maester Luwin always did his best to remain true to the words the boy sent home, though omitting any mention of dragons that couldn't be attached to legends or history.

"Jon!" Arya called, running up to stand next to Gendry as Jon gently tapped away Robin's swing and moved to block Bran's. He glanced aside in time to see her pull herself up to rest her feet on the bottom rung of the short fence and wrap her hands around the top. There was a wide grin splitting her face and she'd pulled her hair back into a braid and secured at the back of her head.

"They've been at it for a while, m'lady," Gendry told her softly, voice barely carrying over to Jon. "Shouldn't be long until Lord Jon calls a break—ow! mi—Arya!"

"Not so hard, is it? And it's just Jon." She rolled her eyes as he rubbed at his shoulder.

*Some things never change.*

"Arya," Jon called, "if you want to hit people grab a practice sword and wade in. Otherwise Gendry's earned enough bruises today." He grabbed Bran's wrist and struck Robin's sword just hard enough that it was flung from his grasp.

"I would," she said, not sounding too put out, "but I am to meet mother in her solar within a quarter hour."

"Catch your breath," Jon told the boys and then turned to face his sister. "You'll be late if you're not careful."

She shrugged and jumped into the ring, dashing forward to wrap her arms around his waist, hugging him tightly. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"You're welcome." He hugged her back and then leaned down to ask, "What are you thanking me for?"

"Syrio Forrell!" Arya beamed up at him.

"Who?" Robin asked, glancing at Bran who shrugged.

"Syrio Forrell is here?"

"Not yet, but he will be!" She pulled back, hopping on her heels. "Father received a letter this morning, he's agreed to a temporary arrangement to teach me . . . and others. He may have already left Braavos by now!"

"Father told you of him already?" Jon was surprised; he had thought it would be a surprise.
She nodded, letting go of him and stepping back. "Yes, just now," a sheepish look on her face, "to get me to allow mother to make me something to wear during practice."

Ah, there it was. His sister’s clothes were often more guesswork than not when it came to sizing them. She avoided the sewing circles as if needles and yarn carried the plague and keeping her still to gain accurate measurements was a near impossible feat.

Lady Catelyn will probably use this as an opportunity to make her several dresses as well. Especially considering Arya had several decent pairs of breaches in her room. She didn't even have to hide them anymore as Lord Stark had quietly allowed Jon and Robb to continue teaching her so long as she touched nothing but a wooden practice sword—for now at least.

"Who's Syrio Forrell?" Gendry asked once Arya had dashed off again.

"The former First Sword of Braavos," Jon said as they watched her narrowly avoid a servant girl.

"A first sword of Braavos is coming here? To teach Ar—Lady Arya?"

"A suggestion, Gendry," Jon stepped back towards the center of the ring raising his sword, "don't call my sister lady unless you're in our lord father or Lady Stark's presence. It won't end well—for you. Now pick up your sword and get in here."

Chapter End Notes

The portions with House Martell are coming up next, they are also in need of the most editing, which is what I am currently working on. My goal through the rest of Early Autumn is to get at least one part out a week, likely on Sundays since currently that is when I have the most time. I do possibly have jury duty at the end of this month that will require traveling two plus hours away and I won't know if I get chosen or what/how long the case will take for a few weeks yet, but I hope to have the sections edited that I would post during that time frame and ready to post.

End Notes

09/22/19 - Story is actively being worked on, but I made a mistake in beginning to post Early Autumn before it was done, unlike the other sections of this fic. Once Early Autumn is satisfactorily edited I will begin posting it. It may be a month or so.

Parts 1 to 67 have been edited for spelling, punctuation, word choice, and grammar. Most author notes were removed for those that download the ebook/pdf for cleaner reading. A few sentences were reworded but nothing that changes anything major. The edited versions of 68 to 71 will be posted once I begin posting the finished version of Early Autumn. It is unlikely anything major will change in them and I will warn if anything does.

Yes, I am updating CG. I needed to get my rhythm of GOT back after months of working OT and having no time to write. I didn't want VB to be the story I did that with.
If any dialogue seems familiar, it probably belongs to GRRM and/or HBO.

My GOT stories are posted in two places with permission here and on ff.net under my account "Falcon-Rider". If that changes I will notate that here or on my ff.net author profile page.

Since I was asked:
* If people want to use concepts from my stories (including flashbacks from this story) to base another story off of ask first and explain what you are going to do. You can leave a comment on one of my AO3 stories or PM me on ff.net as that email goes to my phone. Never is it ok to repost my stories or large chunks of them without my permission.
* I am willing to allow translations be posted if I am asked before it is posted and this story is clearly linked and cited as the original. Also, send me a link so I can link it here.
* No. I will not authorize a "continuation" of this fic. It isn't abandoned. Life just got in the way and wasn't helped by a horrible final season.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!