

Jon Snow - 293 AC

The godswood was quiet in the grey light before dawn, the only sounds the gentle lap of water against stone and the occasional rustle of leaves overhead. Jon moved carefully along the path, his breath misting in the cool morning air. His purple eyes scanned the shadows, making certain no one else had risen this early.

If anyone sees us meeting alone again, the rumors will be unbearable, he thought, pulling his cloak tighter. *Though after last night...*

His cheeks warmed at the memory of Wylla's lips against his, soft and quick and tasting of lemon cakes. His first kiss. Their first kiss.

"You're grinning like a fool, boy," Kuruk's voice suddenly filled his head, amused and knowing. "Anyone watching would think you've lost your wits."

Jon's smile vanished instantly, his face flushing deeper. "Would you stop doing that?" he muttered under his breath.

"Where's the fun in that? Besides, the girl's already here. Try not to walk into a tree while you're daydreaming about—"

"I wasn't daydreaming," Jon hissed.

He rounded a bend in the path and there she was, sitting on the stone bench beside the reflecting pool. Wylla had pulled her green hair back with a leather cord, though several strands had escaped to frame her face. She wore a simple grey dress under her dark blue cloak, practical rather than ornamental. Her eyes—the color of moss after rain, Jon had decided—lit up when she saw him approach.

Gods, she's beautiful, he thought, then immediately felt foolish for thinking it.

"There you are!" Wylla stood, her smile bright enough to rival the rising sun. "I was beginning to think you'd changed your mind."

"Never," Jon said, his voice coming out softer than intended. He cleared his throat. "I just... wanted to make sure no one saw me leave."

"Smart." Wylla glanced toward the castle, its white walls taking on a pink hue as dawn approached. "We probably have an hour, maybe less, before the servants start moving about."

"Then we shouldn't waste time." Jon moved to the pool's edge, extending his hand toward the water. With a gentle pulling motion, he drew a sphere of liquid into the air. Moonlight—the moon was still visible, pale and fading—caught in the water like captured stars.

"Show-off," Wylla teased, but her eyes were wide with wonder.

"Your turn," Jon said, letting the water splash back into the pool. "Remember what I showed you last night. Feel the water's rhythm. Don't force it—ask it."

Wylla knelt beside the pool, her brow furrowing in concentration as she extended her hands over the surface. For a long moment, nothing happened. Jon could see the frustration building in the set of her jaw, the slight tremor in her fingers.

"You're trying too hard," he said gently, kneeling beside her. "Water is—"

"The element of change," Wylla finished, shooting him a look that was half-annoyed, half-amused. "You've said that about a dozen times now, Jon Snow. I'm starting to think you just like hearing yourself talk."

"She's got spirit, this one," Kuruk chuckled in Jon's mind. "I can see why you're smitten."

Jon ignored the voice, focusing on Wylla. "Close your eyes. Feel the cool air on your skin, the way it moves. Water and air, they're connected. Both flow, both adapt. Now reach out, not with your hands, but with... with whatever it is inside us that makes this possible."

Wylla closed her eyes, her breathing slowing. Jon watched as the tension gradually left her shoulders. The water in the pool began to tremble, tiny ripples spreading from beneath her hands.

"That's it," Jon whispered. "You're doing it."

A single droplet rose from the pool, hovering unsteadily above Wylla's right palm. Then another joined it. And another. Jon held his breath as a fourth and fifth droplet lifted, all five floating in a loose circle above her hand like tiny moons.

"By the gods," Wylla breathed, her eyes snapping open. The droplets wobbled but held their positions. "Jon, I'm really doing it!"

"Five droplets!" Kuruk's voice boomed with genuine pride in Jon's head. "On her second day of training! Boy, your girl can now conquer the entire Westeros without a problem."

Shut up, Jon thought with amusement.

"You're amazing," Jon said aloud, meaning every word. Wylla's smile could have melted the Wall itself.

"I had a good teacher," she replied, then her concentration wavered. The five droplets fell, splashing back into the pool. Wylla laughed. "Well, mostly good. He does tend to repeat himself."

"Only because you don't listen the first twelve times," Jon shot back, grinning.

"Oh? And whose fault is that?" Wylla stood, brushing water from her hands onto her dress. "Maybe if my teacher wasn't so distracted by—"

She cut herself off, her own cheeks pinking slightly. Jon's heart did something complicated in his chest.

"Distracted by what?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

"By... by making sure I'm doing it right," Wylla finished lamely, not meeting his eyes. "Obviously."

"Obviously," Jon echoed, though they both knew that wasn't what she'd been about to say.

"Oh, this is painful to watch," Kuruk groaned. "You kissed last night, so why are you two acting like a bunch—"

"Your turn," Wylla said quickly, gesturing to the pool. "Show me something impressive. Make me feel like a complete novice."

Jon hesitated, then nodded. He'd been practicing this technique in his mind for days, ever since the ship incident. The memory of that massive wave, the power that had flowed through him, the way the water had answered his call—it called to something deep inside him.

He stood, planting his feet in a wide stance. His hands moved in slow, deliberate circles, and he felt it immediately—the connection. Not just to the pool before him, but to everything. The morning dew clinging to the grass. The moisture in the air. The water in his skin.

Water is everywhere, he realized. Part of everything. Part of me.

"Good, good," Kuruk murmured, his tone shifting to that of a teacher. "Now draw it together. All of it. Let it answer your call."

Jon's purple eyes narrowed in concentration. He pulled, not with his hands but with his will, with that strange sense inside him that he still didn't fully understand. The water in the pool began to rise, but so did the dew from the grass, tiny droplets lifting like morning mist. Even the water from his own skin joined the gathering mass.

It swirled before him, a sphere growing larger with each second. Two feet across. Three feet. The water moved in complex patterns within the sphere, currents visible like rivers within rivers.

"Jon," Wylla breathed, stepping back. "That's... that's incredible."

"I'm not done," Jon said, and he barely recognized his own voice—it sounded older, more confident. He drew his right hand back to his shoulder, fingers extended like a blade. The water sphere elongated, responding to his intent, becoming a column.

Then he slashed forward.

The water followed his motion, compressed and sharpened by his will. It shot forward like a sword stroke made liquid, a blade of water that sang as it cut through the air. It struck a young oak tree at the godswood's edge—not one of the ancient trees, Jon noted with relief—and it left a slash mark across its trunk.

For a moment, neither of them moved. Jon stared at his hand, at the water now falling back to the pool in a gentle rain. He'd done that. He'd actually done that.

"Seven hells," Wylla whispered. She walked to the wounded tree, running her fingers over the cut surface. It was smooth, almost polished. "Jon, this is... you could kill someone with this."

The reality of her words hit him like a punch to the gut. Yes. Yes, he could. He'd been thinking of it as training, as something wondrous and new. But this was a weapon. He was learning to be a weapon.

"Ha! Now that's what I'm talking about!" Kuruk crowed triumphantly. "That's the technique I showed you on the docks, refined and perfected! The girl's right though—you could take a man's head clean off with a strike like that. I once saw a master waterbender in my time cut through a ship's mast with a technique just like that. You're learning fast, boy. Faster than you should be able to, honestly."

Jon swallowed hard, lowering his hand. "I didn't mean to... I was just trying to show..."

"That you're incredibly powerful?" Wylla turned back to him, her expression unreadable. "That you're carrying around the ability to slice through trees trunks and probably people and no one knows? Jon, this is..." She paused, seeming to search for words. "Who else knows about this? About us? About what we can do?"

The question he'd been dreading. Jon glanced around the godswood, confirming they were still alone. "No one," he said quietly. "Not my father, not Robb, not anyone. Just you and me."

"Shouldn't someone know?" Wylla pressed, moving closer. "Someone we trust? Your father seems—"

"No." The word came out sharper than Jon intended. He softened his tone. "No one can know. Not yet. Maybe not ever."

"Why not?" Wylla's green eyes searched his face. "Jon, if there are others who can do this, people who could help us understand—"

"That's exactly why we can't tell anyone," Jon interrupted. He thought of the Red Priestess in the market, the way she'd known, the way her eyes had burned into him. He thought of Theon's suspicion after the fishing incident, of the way people already looked at him differently because of his purple eyes and bastard status. "Wylla, think about it. What happens when people find out? What happens when they learn that some people can control the very elements? There will be fear. Suspicion. People will either want to use us or destroy us."

"Use us?" Wylla frowned. "Jon, you're being—"

"Am I?" Jon challenged. "I did something during a fish race, and Theon has been suspicious ever since, and he knows me...to a degree. Imagine what strangers would think. What lords and ladies would do if they knew someone could kill them with a gesture, could slice their necks with just the water in their cups, could—" He stopped himself, the dark possibilities spiraling in his mind.

"Wise words, boy," Kuruk said quietly. "Keep your secrets close. The world isn't ready for what you are. What either of you are."

Wylla bit her lip, her gaze dropping to the tree again. "But what if there are others? Others who can bend, and they don't even know it's possible? We didn't know until you showed me. What if there are people out there who've had strange things happen, little accidents they couldn't explain, and they've been suffering because they thought they were cursed or mad?"

He'd been so focused on hiding, on keeping this secret, that he hadn't considered the possibility. But Wylla was right. She could bend water, and she'd had no idea such a thing was possible until he'd shown her. How many others might there be?

"I... I don't know," Jon admitted. He reached up, running a hand through his dark hair in frustration. "I've thought about it. Since you—since last night, when you moved that droplet—I've wondered. You're the first person I've met who could do this besides me. But if you can..."

"Then others might be able to as well," Wylla finished. "People who could bend earth or fire or air. People who don't know that's what's happening when strange things occur around them."

Jon nodded slowly. The implications were staggering. "Four elements," he said quietly. "Water, earth, fire, air. That's what Kyoshi—" He stopped himself, but too late.

"Kyoshi?" Wylla's eyes sharpened. "Who's Kyoshi? Jon, you keep mentioning these names, these people who taught you. Where are they? How did they find you? How do you know so much about bending when no one else in the Seven Kingdoms has even heard the word?"

Jon's stomach twisted. This was dangerous ground. How could he explain the spirits that appeared to him, the voices in his head, the way he sometimes dreamed of impossible cities and battles fought with elements instead of steel? How could he make her understand when he barely understood himself?

"I can't explain," he said finally. "Not yet. Wylla, you have to trust me when I say that the less you know about some things, the safer you are."

"Safer?" Wylla's voice rose slightly. "Jon, I can move water with my mind. I think 'safe' stopped being an option the moment that first droplet floated above my hand."

"She's not wrong," Kuruk observed dryly.

"I know, but—" Jon struggled to find the words. "There are things about me, about what I can do, that I don't fully understand myself. Things that..." He paused, thinking of Korys's cold eyes, of Kyoshi's painted face, of Aang's arrow tattoos, of Roku's fire-nation clothes, of Kuruk's water tribe blues. "Things that are complicated."

"More complicated than being able to slice through trees with water?" Wylla challenged.

"Yes," Jon said simply.

They stood in silence for a moment, the only sound the gentle morning breeze rustling through the trees.

Finally, Wylla sighed. "Alright. Keep your secrets, Jon Snow. For now." She stepped closer, close enough that Jon could smell the salt-and-lavender scent of her hair. "But answer me this—why can you bend more than one element when I can only bend water? You made fire before. You moved air at the feast. Now you're cutting through trees with water. What makes you different?"

Jon's mouth went dry. Because I'm the Avatar. The words almost escaped his lips, but he caught them. Except he didn't even know what that meant. Korys used that word—but he never explained it. They taught him techniques, warned him of dangers, but the fundamental question of *what* he was remained unanswered.

"I don't know," Jon said, and it was the truth. "I wish I did. All I know is that I can reach for fire, water, and air, and they answer. Well, fire used to answer. Now it doesn't." The admission tasted bitter. "Maybe I'm not as special as I thought."

"Oh, you're special alright," Wylla said, but her tone was soft, not mocking. "Special enough to keep secrets from the girl you kissed last night."

Jon's face flamed. "That's not—I'm not keeping secrets because—Wylla, I trust you. More than anyone. If I could explain—"

"But you can't," Wylla finished. She didn't sound angry, just resigned. "Or won't. I'm not sure which is worse."

"Can't," Jon said firmly. "Wylla, I swear on the old gods and the new, I would tell you everything if I could. But there are some things I'm still trying to understand myself. And some secrets..." He thought of the spirits, of Kuruk's warning about Korys, of the way his firebending had simply vanished. "Some secrets might be dangerous to share."

"Good instincts," Kuruk murmured approvingly. "Even those you love don't need to know everything. Hell, especially those you love. Knowledge can be a burden as much as a blessing."

Wylla studied Jon's face for a long moment, her green eyes searching his purple ones. Whatever she saw there seemed to satisfy her, because she finally nodded. "Alright. I'll trust

you. But Jon?" She reached out, taking his hand. Her fingers were cool and damp from the water. "If you're keeping secrets to protect me, remember that I chose this. I asked you to teach me. Whatever comes, we face it together. That's what 'together' means."

Jon's throat tightened. He squeezed her hand, marveling at how small it felt in his, how brave she was. "Together," he agreed. Then, because he couldn't help himself, he added, "Even if my teaching methods are repetitive?"

Wylla's answering laugh was like sunlight breaking through clouds. "Especially then. Someone needs to keep you humble."

"Humble? Me?" Jon grinned. "I'm a bastard who can cut through trees with water. I'm the very picture of humility."

"Oh gods, now you're getting cocky," Wylla groaned, but she was smiling. "This is what I get for praising your technique."

"You think that was impressive?" Jon found himself showing off, drawing water from the pool again. "Watch this."

He formed the water into a series of spinning rings, each rotating in a different direction. Then, with careful precision, he shaped each ring into a different form—a wolf, a merman, a direwolf, a trident. They spun around each other in an intricate dance before splashing back into the pool.

Wylla applauded, her eyes bright. "Very pretty. Can you make them do tricks too?"

"Give me time," Jon said, laughing. "I've only been doing this for—" He stopped, realizing he didn't actually know how long it had been since that first candle had relit itself in Winterfell's library. Weeks? Months? It felt like both a lifetime and no time at all.

"Doing this for what?" Wylla prompted.

"Not long enough to impress you properly, apparently," Jon deflected.

The sky was growing lighter now, the grey of dawn giving way to pale blue. Soon the castle would wake, and they'd need to return separately to avoid questions neither of them could answer.

"We should go," Jon said reluctantly. "Before someone notices we're both missing."

"I suppose you're right." Wylla glanced at the wounded tree. "What about that? Won't someone wonder what happened?"

Jon examined the mark on the trunk, then shrugged. "Storm damage? These things happen."

"Storm damage that left a perfectly smooth cut?" Wylla raised an eyebrow.

"A very sharp storm," Jon insisted, earning another laugh.

They stood there a moment longer, hands still clasped, neither quite ready to return to the world where they had to pretend to be just friends, where Jon was just a bastard and Wylla was just a highborn lady.

"Jon?" Wylla's voice was quiet. "Thank you. For trusting me with this. For teaching me. For... for everything."

"Thank you for not running away screaming when I told you I could control elements," Jon replied. "That was a distinct possibility."

"Oh, I considered it," Wylla said lightly. "But then who would keep you from getting too full of yourself?"

"A crucial service," Jon agreed solemnly.

Wylla rose on her toes and kissed his cheek, quick and soft. Jon froze, his heart hammering so loudly he was certain she could hear it.

"Same time tomorrow?" she whispered.

Jon could only manage a nod.

"Good." Wylla released his hand and stepped back. "Try not to cut any more trees in the meantime. People might start to wonder."

She slipped away along the path, her green hair the last thing visible before the shadows swallowed her. Jon stood alone in the godswood, one hand touching his cheek where her lips had been.

"That girl is going to be trouble for you," Kuruk said, but his tone was fond. "The best kind of trouble."

Jon smiled. "I know."

The Spirit World

The Spirit World had chosen to manifest as an endless garden today.

Aang sat cross-legged on a stone that seemed to float just above the ground, his arrow tattoos glowing faintly blue against his bald head.

"He's improving faster than I expected," Aang said, a smile touching his lips. "Did you see that water slash? The boy has real talent."

"Of course he has talent," Kuruk drawled, leaning against a tree with his arms crossed. The Water Tribe warrior looked exactly as he had in life—handsome, cocky, with a wild edge that a hundred and fifty years in the Spirit World hadn't dulled. His blue tunic was trimmed with white fur, and his dark hair was pulled back in a traditional warrior's style. "I taught him that technique. Well, showed him the foundation of it. He refined it himself, which is even more impressive."

"You're taking credit for his work now?" Kyoshi's voice cut through the pleasant atmosphere like a blade. She stood tall and imposing, nearly seven feet in her armor, her face painted in the traditional style of her island home. "How typical."

"I'm not *taking credit*," Kuruk protested. "I'm acknowledging that he's a good student. There's a difference, though I wouldn't expect you to understand nuance."

"Children," Roku said mildly. "We're not here to bicker. We're here to discuss the boy's progress and... complications."

"Complications is putting it mildly," said Yangchen, the last of their circle. The Air Nomad woman stood with her hands clasped before her, her grey eyes thoughtful beneath her tattoos. Unlike Aang's monk robes, she wore the more formal attire of an Air Nomad elder, with layers of yellow and orange that spoke of her status. "Jon's waterbending is advancing at an extraordinary rate, while his firebending has vanished completely. That's not a complication. That's a crisis."

Aang's smile faded. "I know. I've been thinking about that." He stood, pacing the clearing with his hands behind his back. "The water slash was impressive, yes, but I'm more concerned about the *why* behind his training. He's learning combat applications, battle techniques. What about healing? What about the gentler arts of waterbending?"

"Gentler arts?" Kyoshi scoffed. "This world doesn't reward gentle, Aang. It rewards strength. The boy needs to learn to fight or he'll die."

"He's *ten years old*," Aang countered, his voice rising slightly. "He should be learning to heal cuts and purify water, not how to decapitate his enemies."

"And when someone tries to kill him for being different?" Kyoshi challenged. "Will you teach him to heal his own corpse?"

"No one's going to kill him if we're smart about this," Roku interjected, his tone diplomatic. "Aang has a point about the healing, though. A balanced Avatar should know all aspects of bending, not just the destructive applications."

"I agree," Yangchen said quietly. "But let's address the larger issue. Jon's firebending hasn't just weakened—it's gone entirely. One day he could create and maintain flame, the next he can't produce even a spark. That's not natural. Something or someone has interfered."

"The Red Priestess," Kyoshi said immediately, her voice flat and certain. "That woman in the market who approached him. She reeked of foreign magic. She did something to him."

Kuruk made a dismissive sound. "You're jumping to conclusions. We don't even know what she said to him. Jon ran before—"

"Exactly," Kyoshi interrupted. "He ran. That boy faces down older opponents in the melee without flinching, but one conversation with that woman and he fled like a frightened rabbit. She threatened him somehow, or cursed him, or—"

"Or maybe he was just scared because a stranger knew his secrets," Kuruk shot back. "Have you considered that? The woman unnerved him. That doesn't mean she stole his bending."

"She mentioned seeing him in flames," Yangchen pointed out, her tone measured. "Visions of 'ancient powers awakening.' That's not coincidence, Kuruk. This Red Priestess knows something, or serves something, that's aware of Jon."

Aang frowned, his eternal optimism dimming. "Even if she is involved, we need to approach this carefully. We can't just—"

"Kill her," Kyoshi finished bluntly. "That's what you were going to say I'd suggest, isn't it? Well, you're right. The simplest solution is to remove the threat. The boy could snap her neck with waterbending, or freeze her blood, or—"

"Absolutely not," Aang said sharply, his grey eyes flashing. "We are not teaching Jon to be an assassin. Murder isn't the answer, Kyoshi. It's never the answer."

"Here we go again," Kyoshi muttered, rolling her eyes. "The great Aang and his precious morality."

"It's not about morality, it's about—"

"It's *always* about morality with you," Kyoshi cut him off, stepping forward. "You're so obsessed with your own philosophy, your own way of doing things, that you can't see reality. This world is harsh, Aang. Harsher than ours ever was. They have no bending here, no balance, no Avatar tradition. Just war and betrayal and blood."

"I'm well aware of what this world is like, mostly," Aang replied, his voice tight. "I've been watching it for ten years, just like you. That doesn't mean we should—"

"Should what? Actually solve problems instead of meditating on them?" Kyoshi's voice dripped with sarcasm. "That woman is a threat. She knows about Jon. She serves some god of fire and light that we've never heard of, which means she has powers we don't understand. The logical solution is to eliminate her before she can act against him."

"The logical solution is to kill someone?" Aang shook his head in disbelief. "Kyoshi, listen to yourself. You're talking about teaching a ten-year-old boy to commit murder."

"I'm talking about teaching him to survive," Kyoshi snapped. "You can't force your pacifist nonsense on him, Aang. Jon isn't you. He'll never be you. This world isn't going to let him be you."

"I'm not trying to make him me!" Aang's voice rose, genuine anger coloring his words. "I'm trying to make sure he doesn't become a killer before he's old enough to understand what that means. There's a difference between self-defense and assassination, and you seem determined to blur that line."

"Oh, please," Kyoshi scoffed. "Spare me the lecture. You've killed, Aang. Don't pretend you haven't. You just did it from a distance, or in the Avatar State, so you could tell yourself it wasn't really you. At least I'm honest about what violence means."

"That's not fair," Roku interjected, but Kyoshi ignored him.

"Jon is a child," Aang said, his voice shaking slightly. "A child who's already carrying the burden of being a bastard, of having powers he doesn't understand, of keeping secrets that isolate him from everyone he loves. And you want to add 'murderer' to that list? You want to stain his hands with blood before he's even old enough to grow a beard?"

"I want him to *live*," Kyoshi fired back. "I want him to reach his eleventh birthday, and his twelfth, and his twentieth. And he won't do that if we're squeamish about the hard choices. This world is merciless, Aang. It will chew him up and spit him out if we don't prepare him properly."

"There are good people in this world too," Aang insisted. "The Starks, the Manderlys, that girl Wylla who's falling in love with him. Not everyone is an enemy. Not everyone wants to stab him in the back."

Kyoshi laughed, but there was no humor in it. "I lived for two hundred and thirty years, Aang. I fought Earth Kingdom warlords, Fire Nation raiders, corrupt officials, and peasant uprisings. Do you know what I learned in all that time? That most people, given the right circumstances, will betray you. They'll smile to your face and plot your death behind your back. They'll use you for power, for safety, for profit. And the people in this world?" She gestured broadly. "They're no different. Same greed. Same ambition. Same willingness to sacrifice others for their own benefit."

"That's a bleak way to see the world," Yangchen said softly.

"It's a *realistic* way," Kyoshi countered. "And if we coddle Jon, if we fill his head with Aang's fairy tales about peace and understanding, he'll be dead within a year."

"Enough," Roku said firmly, his voice carrying the unmistakable weight of command. "Both of you. This argument is accomplishing nothing." He looked between Aang and Kyoshi, his expression stern. "Kyoshi, Aang isn't trying to get Jon killed. He's trying to preserve the boy's innocence for as long as possible. That's not weakness."

"And Aang," Roku continued, turning to the Air Nomad, "Kyoshi isn't wrong that this world is dangerous. We need to prepare Jon for hard choices, even if we hope he never has to make them."

"Thank you," Kyoshi said with satisfaction.

"However," Roku added, his gaze sharpening, "killing the Red Priestess might not solve anything. In fact, it might make everything worse."

Kyoshi frowned. "What do you mean?"

Yangchen spoke up, her voice thoughtful. "The priestess mentioned R'hllor—the Lord of Light, the Red God. She said she serves this deity, that it showed her visions of Jon in her flames. If she's telling the truth, we're not dealing with a lone zealot. We're dealing with divine intervention."

"A god," Aang said slowly. "An actual god, interfering in this world."

"It would explain why we're here," Yangchen mused. "Why the Avatar cycle jumped to this world instead of staying in ours. Perhaps this R'hllor sensed Jon's birth, sensed the Avatar spirit crossing into his realm, and sent his priestess to investigate."

"Or to stop him," Kyoshi added darkly.

"Or to recruit him," Yangchen countered. "We don't know this god's intentions. But if Melisandre is truly his servant, killing her won't eliminate the threat. It will just anger a deity we don't understand, in a world where we have no power except through Jon."

Kuruk, who had been silent during the heated exchange, finally spoke. "Or maybe it has nothing to do with fire gods at all."

All eyes turned to him. He pushed off from the tree, his casual posture belying the seriousness in his eyes.

"What are you talking about?" Roku asked.

"Jon's firebending didn't disappear because of some priestess or god," Kuruk said slowly, working through his thoughts aloud. "It disappeared because of Jon himself. Because of who he is. What he is."

"Explain," Kyoshi demanded.

Kuruk began to pace, his hands gesturing as he spoke. "We all know who Jon's parents really are. Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark. Dragon and wolf. Fire and ice. The boy is literally the union of two opposing forces."

"So?" Kyoshi prompted impatiently.

"So right now, Jon believes he's Ned Stark's bastard," Kuruk continued. "He was raised in Winterfell, surrounded by wolves and winter and Northern honor. He worships the old gods, wears grey and white. He's embracing his Stark side—the ice, the winter, the North. And that's manifesting in his bending. Water has become his strongest element. He can freeze, he can slash, he can sense the tides. Water is flowing through him like never before."

"But fire has gone cold," Yangchen said, understanding dawning in her eyes.

"Exactly," Kuruk pointed at her. "Because fire is his Targaryen side. The dragon he doesn't know he carries. Right now, that part of him is buried, hidden, suppressed by his belief in his own identity. He thinks he's a Snow, not a dragon. And so the dragon sleeps."

"That's..." Roku paused, considering. "That's an interesting theory, but I'm not sure it holds up. Heritage shouldn't affect bending ability like that. We've never seen anything like this in Avatar history."

"Haven't we?" Kuruk challenged. "What about Avatars who struggled with their opposite element? Earth Kingdom Avatars who couldn't grasp air, Fire Nation Avatars who fought with water? It's always been about mentality, about spiritual alignment. Jon's spiritual identity is in flux. He's a dragon who thinks he's a wolf, and his bending is reflecting that confusion."

"That's completely speculative," Aang said, shaking his head. "Jon doesn't even know about his Targaryen heritage. How could something he's ignorant of affect his abilities so profoundly?"

"Because the spirit knows," Kuruk insisted. "The body knows. The blood knows. Consciousness is only one layer of identity, Aang. You of all people should understand that—you were the Avatar from birth, whether you knew it or not. That identity shaped you before you could even speak."

"He has a point," Yangchen admitted reluctantly. "The Avatar spirit exists beyond conscious awareness. It's entirely possible that Jon's heritage, his bloodline, his very nature as both fire and ice, is creating an internal conflict that manifests in his bending."

"So what do you suggest?" Roku asked Kuruk. "We tell him? 'Hello Jon, you're actually the son of a prince everyone thinks was evil, and your whole life is a lie'? That will surely help his emotional stability."

"I'm not suggesting anything," Kuruk said. "I'm just offering an explanation that doesn't require us to fight gods or murder priestesses. When Jon's Targaryen side emerges—and it will, eventually, truth always surfaces—his fire will return. Mark my words."

"And if you're wrong?" Kyoshi challenged.

Kuruk shrugged. "Then we figure out what the Red Priestess did and undo it. But my instincts say I'm right."

"Your instincts also said you could drink an entire barrel of seal wine," Kyoshi retorted. "How did that work out?"

"I did drink it," Kuruk said defensively. "What happened afterward wasn't my fault."

"You started a brawl that destroyed half a village!"

"That's beside the point—"

"Focus," Yangchen said sharply, cutting through their bickering. "Whether Kuruk's theory is correct or not, we have more immediate concerns. Jon and the Manderly girl are developing feelings for each other."

Aang's expression softened immediately, a smile returning to his face. "I know. It's wonderful, isn't it? His first love, and she's a waterbender. Just like Katara and me. It feels like..." He paused, his voice growing wistful. "Like maybe some things are meant to be, even across worlds."

"It's a complication," Kyoshi said flatly.

"It's beautiful," Aang countered. "Love is always beautiful, Kyoshi. Even you can't be cynical about that."

"Watch me, but you are right, he deserves this," Kyoshi replied with a fond smile, but then she added. "But that's not what concerns me. What concerns me is that the girl can bend at all."

The clearing fell silent again as the implication sank in.

"If she can bend..." Roku began slowly.

"Then there are others," Yangchen finished. "There have to be. Wylla wasn't born with knowledge of bending. She didn't even know it was possible until Jon showed her. Which means there could be dozens, hundreds, maybe thousands of people in this world with the potential to bend, all completely unaware."

"Is that really a problem?" Aang asked. "If they don't know bending exists, they can't exactly train in it. They'll just live normal lives, never knowing they had the potential."

"Until they accidentally bend in public," Kyoshi said grimly. "Aang, you know how this goes. You've seen it in our world. Remember the reports from the Earth Kingdom? Weak benders who lived their whole lives without manifesting, then suddenly their ability erupts in a moment of extreme emotion?"

Aang's face grew serious. "The merchant who buried his family after a mudslide and earthbent the rubble away in grief."

"The factory worker who accidentally set her workplace on fire when her employer struck her," Roku added quietly.

"The sailor who called a wave to save his drowning son," Kuruk contributed. "I investigated that one personally. Poor man had no idea he was a waterbender until that moment. Afterward, he couldn't do it again, no matter how hard he tried. The ability just... slipped away, like it was never there."

"Exactly," Kyoshi said. "Stress, anger, fear, desperation—these are the triggers for accidental bending. Sooner or later, someone is going to bend in front of the wrong people. And when that happens..."

"The story spreads," Yangchen said softly. "Tales of people with impossible powers. And once people know such powers exist..."

"They'll start looking for more," Roku finished. "They'll test their citizens, their soldiers. They'll hunt for anyone who shows the signs."

"And they'll weaponize them," Kyoshi added darkly. "What lord wouldn't want a waterbender to control his moat, or a firebender to burn his enemies' crops? What king wouldn't seek an earthbender to build his fortifications, or an airbender to carry messages across great distances?"

"It would reshape the entire balance of power," Yangchen agreed. "Nations would go to war over benders. Families would be torn apart. Anyone with the ability would become a target—either to be used or to be eliminated."

Aang looked stricken. "We can't let that happen. We have to—"

"What?" Kyoshi interrupted. "Stop it? How? We're spirits, Aang. We can whisper in Jon's ear, but we can't control what happens in this world. If other benders start manifesting, there's nothing we can do."

"We can prepare Jon," Roku said firmly. "Make sure he's ready to face whatever comes. If war erupts over bending, if people start hunting benders or enslaving them, Jon needs to be strong enough to make a difference."

"He's ten," Aang repeated, but his voice lacked conviction now. "He's just a boy."

"He's the Avatar," Kyoshi said, and for once her voice wasn't harsh. "He was never going to be just a boy, Aang. You know that better than anyone."

"So what do we do?" Yangchen asked, looking around at her fellow Avatars. "Continue training him? Watch and wait? Try to prevent other benders from manifesting?"

"We do what we've always done," Roku said. "Guide him as best we can. Prepare him for the challenges ahead. And hope that when the time comes, he makes the right choices."

"And the Red Priestess?" Kyoshi pressed.

"We watch her," Yangchen decided. "If she acts against Jon directly, we'll deal with it then. But Kuruk might be right—Jon's missing firebending might have nothing to do with her at all."

"And if I'm wrong?" Kuruk asked.

"Then we'll figure it out," Aang said, some of his usual optimism returning. "Together. That's what we do—all of us, despite our disagreements." He looked pointedly at Kyoshi.

"Don't get sentimental," Kyoshi muttered.

"One more thing," Roku said. "The girl—Wylla. We need to watch her too. If her bending manifests publicly, if anyone sees what she can do..."

"Jon will protect her," Aang said with certainty. "He cares for her already. He won't let anyone hurt her."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Kyoshi said quietly. "Love makes you do anything, especially when it comes to protecting that love. Including making very poor decisions in the name of protecting his beloved."

"Or very brave ones," Aang countered.

"Sometimes they're the same thing," Yangchen observed.

The five Avatars stood in silence for a moment, each lost in their own thoughts. Around them, the Spirit World's garden continued to shift and change, reflecting the uncertainty of their situation.

Finally, Kuruk spoke. "The boy's going to face his toughest fight yet in a few hours. The second round of the Meele. Should we help him?"

"He'll be fine," Yangchen said with quiet confidence. "Jon Snow is stronger than he knows. Braver than he believes. And he has something none of us had at his age."

"What's that?" Aang asked.

Yangchen smiled. "A friend who knows his secret. A girl who accepts him for what he is, powers and all. That changes everything."

The other Avatars nodded slowly, recognizing the truth in her words.

"Let's watch the melee," Kuruk suggested. "I want to see if the boy remembers the footwork I taught him."

"You mean the footwork you stole from me?" Kyoshi said archly.

"I *adapted* it," Kuruk protested. "There's a difference."

"Children," Roku sighed, but he was smiling.

Daenerys Targaryen

The tea had gone cold again.

Dany stared at the chipped cup in her hands, watching the way the brown liquid sat perfectly still. The cup was old and had a crack down one side that the woman—Mistress Alyra, she'd said her name was—had tried to hide by turning it away. But Dany had seen it anyway. She always noticed the cracks in things.

"Three days," Viserys muttered from across the small wooden table. His voice was quiet, but Dany could hear the anger in it. She'd learned to hear all the different kinds of anger in her brother's voice. This was the bitter kind, the one that meant he would complain but not shout. Not yet. "Three days of charity from this... peasant woman, and then we're back on the streets. As if we're common beggars. As if I'm not—"

"The rightful king," Dany whispered automatically.

"Exactly," Viserys said, louder now. He gestured around the small room with his own cup of tea—his wasn't chipped, Dany noticed. The woman had given him the better cup. "Look at this place. The walls are practically falling apart. There's mold in the corners. Mold, Dany! And the bed she's given us has blankets that smell like... like fish and old cheese."

Dany looked down at her tea again. It really was very cold. She'd been holding it for so long, listening to Viserys talk, that all the warmth had left it. Just like how warmth left everything eventually.

She wished the tea were hot again.

I wish the tea were hot, she thought harder, staring at the cup. *I wish it so much.*

"Are you even listening to me?" Viserys snapped.

"Yes," Dany lied. She was good at lying to Viserys. She'd had lots of practice.

"The woman acts as if she's doing us some grand favor," Viserys continued, his pale violet eyes flashing. Dany's eyes were violet too, but darker, more purple. Like the sky right before night came. She liked her eyes better than Viserys's. His were too light, too cold. "When I take back my throne, when I cross the Narrow Sea with my armies, I'll remember every slight. Every—"

Dany stopped listening again. It was easier that way. Viserys always said the same things anyway. The throne, the armies, the people who would pay for being mean to them. She'd heard it all before.

Instead, she focused on her tea. On wishing it were hot.

Please be hot, she thought. *Please, please, please.*

And then—

Steam.

Dany's eyes went very wide. A tiny wisp of steam was rising from her cup, curling up like a little dragon. She watched it, barely breathing, afraid that if she moved it would stop.

But it didn't stop. More steam came, and the cup in her hands started to feel warm. Not burning warm, not the kind that would hurt. Just... nice warm. Perfect warm.

Dany's heart did a funny jump in her chest.

I did it again, she thought, and the biggest smile she'd ever felt spread across her face. *I made it warm. I made it hot. Just like the candle.*

She lifted the cup to her lips, still smiling so hard her cheeks hurt, and took a small sip.

It was perfect. Not too hot, not cold at all. The tea tasted like honey and summer. It was the most delicious thing she'd ever tasted. Better than the lemon cakes at that one feast they'd been allowed to attend. Better than the fancy wine Viserys had stolen from a merchant's house last year. Better than anything.

Because she'd made it warm. All by herself.

"Why are you smiling like an idiot?" Viserys asked suspiciously. "What's funny?"

"Nothing," Dany said quickly, but she couldn't stop smiling. "The tea is just... it's good tea."

"It's peasant tea," Viserys said with disgust. "Brown water with honey. Probably from the cheapest merchant in the city." But he took a sip anyway, then made a face. "And it's gone cold. Of course it has. Can't even keep tea hot in this hovel."

Dany looked at her brother's cup. She could see that his tea was cold—there was no steam, and he'd made that face he always made when things weren't perfect. But her tea was still warm. Still perfect.

She took another sip and the warm feeling spread all through her, from her tongue down to her belly and out to her fingers and toes. It felt like... like having sunshine inside her. Like being safe and happy and not scared at all.

Maybe I'm magic, Dany thought, and the idea made her want to giggle. *Maybe I'm special, like in the stories. Maybe that's why my tea is hot and Viserys's isn't.*

It was a silly thought. She knew it was silly.

But her tea was hot and she'd made it hot just by wishing, and that seemed pretty magical to Dany.

She decided it was her secret. A good secret, not a scary one. She had the candle secret and now the tea secret, and both of them were hers and hers alone. Viserys didn't know and he didn't have to know.