(Every character depicted in the story below is a consenting legal adult over the age of 18)

A/N: Jon is on edge after the ambush on the High Road, but hey, maybe they're finally going to catch a break!

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Thank the Seven for loyal, stalwart Knights. And thank them as well for as Axel Baratheon. Even days later, having made it to the Kingsroad where they'd stayed the night in the town of Darry, Jon is still a bit… tense. That bandit ambush on the High Road had come out of nowhere and Jon knew, even if the young man was trying to downplay his part in things, that he would be dead right now if it wasn't for Axel.

That arrow had been mere inches away from his chest when Axel had reached out and caught it right out of the air. More than that, the way he'd tackled Jon off of his horse as the second volley had flown was like nothing the Lord of the Vale had ever experienced before.

Jon should have at least broken a bone or something, especially at his age. But instead Axel had somehow managed to cushion both the fall AND the collapse of Jon's horse, taking what should have been Jon's injuries for himself.

For a brief moment, Jon had been afraid that the young King had sacrificed his life for him, or at the very least his good health. But what would have been potentially fatal injuries for Jon seemed to be nothing of consequence for a younger man like Axel. He hadn't even seemed winded when all was said and done.

Jon had tried to talk to Axel about the experience in the days since, but the younger man had been evasive to say the least. In the end, the most he'd been able to get out of Axel was more talk about being blessed by the Seven and a promise to visit the Great Sept of Baelor every day to pay his respects and give thanks if need be.

Which, frankly, seemed like a very good idea at this point. Jon didn't think too many of the Vale Knights accompanying them had seen the things he'd seen with quite as much clarity as he had, thankfully. Even still, there was something very strange about the new King of Westeros and it was likely only a matter of time before rumors started to abound, especially after what happened up in the Eyrie.

They would need to get the High Septon and the rest of the Faith on Axel's side sooner rather than later, lest they give his enemies, whoever they were, another way to undermine the young man's rule.

And Jon knew for a fact that Axel had enemies at this point. The poisoning was one thing, but the bandit ambush? That was suspicious. Maybe if their attackers had been from the mountain clans Jon could have simply written off as them being in the wrong place at the wrong time, but these bandits were decidedly not mountain clan warriors. Something Axel had agreed with when Jon had brought it up at one point.

No, these were bandits from outside of the Vale who for some reason had traveled up the somewhat treacherous, exhausting High Road. All to set up their ambush along a road that saw a bare fraction of the travel and wealth that passed along somewhere like the Kingsroad.

Their presence on the High Road just as Jon was coming down from the Eyrie with Axel at his side was no coincidence. Especially since there'd been no warning about bandits on the road at the Bloody Gate, and Jon

himself had used that exact same road to get to the Eyrie in the first place mere days before. No… someone had tried to have him and the young Crown Prince killed… and if not for Axel's 'blessings' they might very well have succeeded.

Needless to say, this all means that Jon is still very much ready for another attack to come even as they travel down the final stretch of road from Darry to King's Landing. They would probably stop one more time at either the Ivy Inn or Brindlewood before finishing the journey to King's Landing on the morrow, but in the meanwhile, they were currently on the largest stretch of the Kingsroad left between themselves and their destination. The perfect place for another bandit ambush to take place.

They'd already passed by Harrenhal at this point, and if the trees weren't in the way they would likely be able to see the southern edge of the God's Eye to their right within the hour. But for as long as they were on the road and vulnerable, Jon would be tense as a strung bow, waiting for the next boot to drop.

… Which admittedly is why he's so relieved when they see a group of knights on horseback crest the ridge up ahead and come down the road towards them at a canter. Why? Because he immediately recognizes the heraldry on their tabards.

At his side, Axel stiffens up but Jon shoots him a reassuring smile.

"It's alright, Axel. They're on our side. Those are Baratheon Knights."

The young man blinks in surprise, though he doesn't quite lose his frown. Jon understands, the situation these past few days has likely been as rough for Axel as it's been for him. More so even, given the young man didn't even know he was the King's son until a few days ago.

Still, it looks like they've finally had a turn of good luck. As the group of Baratheon Knights slows down upon approach, Ser Vardis moves to greet them, taking point as the Captain of Jon's Guard to make sure they don't get too close to Jon himself.

"Ho there! Identify yourself, please!"

Coming to a stop, one of the Knights moves a bit ahead of the rest of the pack and lifts his faceplate.

"Ser Emmon Cuy of Sunflower Hall!"

Ah, Jon recognizes him as one of Renly's men. It would seem Robert's youngest brother had sent them reinforcements, something that Ser Emmon confirms a moment later.

"Lord Renly sent us ahead to intercept and escort you back to King's Landing!"

Smiling now, Jon lets out a sigh of relief.

"I suppose news of the attempted poisoning has reached the city by raven at this point, though I don't imagine news of the bandit attack on High Road would have gotten there yet. Still, your assistance is much appreciated Ser Cuy."

The Baratheon Knight blinks in surprise before slowly nodding his head.

"… Aye, that's right. Heard about the poisoning, we did. Didn't hear about a bandit attack though. Everyone alright?"

Sighing, Jon frowns as he thinks to their one casualty, a loyal man of House Arryn who hadn't deserved such a death.

"One loss, but beyond that we are all uninjured, hearty, and whole."

Reaching over, he clasps Axel by one of his broad shoulders.

"This here is Axel Baratheon, Crown Prince and Robert's Heir. He will be your new King."

Something flashes across Emmon Cuy's face, but he nevertheless bows his head in Axel's direction with the rest of the Baratheon Knights following suit.

"Your Majesty."

Axel looks discomfited by the display, clearing his throat after a moment of awkward silence.

"Raise your heads, all of you. I'm not King quite yet."

Chuckling, Jon shakes his head.

"No but you are their Crown Prince already, Axel. Don't forget that."

Robert's son frowns but slowly nods, accepting Jon's words. He really is a good man with a good head on his shoulders. Hopefully Jon would be able to help him become a good king as well. At least now that Renly's men are here, he's a lot more confident in their chances of getting to King's Landing without further incident.

Looking back to Ser Emmon, Jon's smile returns.

“As I said, your assistance is sorely appreciated Ser Cuy. Please, have your men fall in with us and let us pick up our pace towards King’s Landing. With this many knights, not even the bravest of bandits will seek to strike at us, so we no longer need to move with any caution.”

“As you command, Lord Hand.”

The Baratheon Knights intermingle with the Knights of the Vale at that, though there are twice as many of the former, making it almost feel like an encirclement rather than a merging. Jon doesn’t mind too much though. In fact, after how the last few days have gone and the two attempts on Axel’s life, he finds himself warmed by the level of care Renly Baratheon is showing for his nephew.

The Master of Laws would surely be a stalwart ally for Axel once they reach King’s Landing and the young man has been coronated. Someone who Axel can lean on even as everyone else tries to manipulate and-

“FOR RENLY!”

“Urk!”

Jon’s eyes widen as he’s cut off mid-thought by an unexpected battle cry. Ser Emmon Cuy’s words are in turn repeated by every Baratheon Knight as the sound of swords being unsheathed fills the air. Before any of the Knights of the Vale can react, Ser Emmon has already stabbed his blade deep into Ser Vardis’ gut, taking the older knight clean off of his horse and sending him to the ground.

From there… pandemonium. And betrayal most foul.

“Treachery! Knights of the Vale, rally!”

To their credit, not all of Jon’s knights fall to ambush. Some are able to block or dodge the blows sent their way, with some blows simply failing to land properly. The fact that they’re all on horseback and were all nearly at a standstill makes things every bit as awkward for their attackers as it is for them.

But in the end, Jon can quickly tell that it probably won’t matter. They’re outnumbered and surrounded and even those who survive the first blows don’t all survive the second. And those who manage to survive the second still find themselves dealing with two on one odds at a minimum.

Of course, then there’s Ser Emmon. As soon as he’s dealt that death blow to Ser Vardis, Ser Emmon turns and tries to swing his sword at Jon. Tries being the opportune word, because it never reaches the Lord of the Vale. Instead, it stops dead in its tracks when Axel grabs it by the blade barehanded and holds it still.

Ser Emmon’s eyes widen in disbelief, even as his attempts to tug his weapon free are met with failure. In the momentary lull, Jon finds himself meeting the Baratheon Knight’s eyes.

“… Why? Why would Renly do this?”

Gritting his teeth, Ser Emmon growls as he struggles to free his blade and slice through Axel’s fingers in the process.

“Lord Renly is the King that the Seven Kingdoms need right now. Not the bastard of a King who lost himself in wine and whores for the last twenty years… nor the Hand who let him do so.”

Jon lets out a low breath at the sheer vitriol and venom in Ser Emmon's voice. He doesn't get a chance to respond though, because the tug-a-war between Axel and the Baratheon Knight comes to an abrupt and sudden end. Not because Axel finally lets the other man have his sword back… but because he finally stops playing around, rips it out of Ser Emmon's hand, and then swings its pommel across his face like a cudgel.

C-CRACK!

The Baratheon Knight goes flying from his horse as his head turns with a sickening snap, landing in a limp sack-like manner that long experience says he's already dead before he even hits the ground. Unfortunately, as satisfying as that is to see… it doesn't change the direness of the greater situation.

All around them, the battle is going bad fast. Seeing just how many of his knights are already on the ground, Jon reaches over and grabs Axel by the arm.

"You must flee, Axel. This is not a battle that can be won, but you of all people need to survive at any costs. Someone has to tell the Lords of Westeros of Renly's base treachery!"

For a long moment, the younger man just stares at Jon blankly and Jon fears that Axel might be in a state of shock. Sure, he'd killed those two bandits back on the High Road, but this was… but no. The blankness drops away after a moment and Robert's son lets out a shuddering breath.

"… Please do not think too poorly of me for what I am about to do, Lord Arryn."

Jon opens his mouth, but Axel doesn't wait for a response. Winding back his arm, he throws Ser Emmon Cuy's sword from his hand, somehow having not cut himself even slightly on the Castle Forged Steel. Slicing through the air almost too fast for Jon's eyes to track, the sword slams into the back of a Baratheon Knight harrying one of the few living Knights still on their side and punches right through his armor and out the front of his breastplate, killing him on the spot.

From there, Axel draws his own sword from its sheath and leaps from his saddle, forcing Jon to hastily take the reins of his horse so it doesn't go galloping off.

… What follows is a monstrous display of strength and speed. Renly's men, who had been mere moments away from carrying the battle with their superior numbers and the element of surprise on their side… now have the tables turned on them completely. Their numbers might still be superior, but that's the only thing they have going for them. Meanwhile, the element of surprise now rests with Axel Baratheon.

In the confusion, it takes a minute for the enemy knights to realize they're being slaughtered by one single man. Some of them jump down from their horses to group up and face him on the ground… while others turn coward and break from the rest upon registering Ser Emmon's body and seeing what Axel is doing to their number.

The latter group are the only ones to survive the ensuing massacre, causing Jon to press his lips together into a thin line as he watches a few of them ride back down the Kingsroad towards King's Landing at a full gallop. He wishes that he had the knights left to go after them, but at this point in time, aside from him and Axel… the remaining Knights of the Vale number just two.

By the time Axel is through however, the number of Baratheon Knights left on the battlefield numbers even less than that. The young man falls upon them like the Stranger itself, crashing into men in full armor and sending THEM tumbling every which way as his sword flashes out and takes life after life.

When it's finally over, Jon can only stare, open-mouthed, along with his two living knights at the bloody scene. Axel, standing there with the blood of over a dozen knights covering him but none of his own, looks around for a long moment before looking to Jon with wide, trepidatious eyes.

It seems strange to see fear in the eyes of a man capable of killing so many without even breathing heavy. But Jon… Jon thinks he understands. Axel doesn't fear death. He fears rejection. He's shown himself to be… beyond a normal man should be. A monster. And now he worries that Jon will turn on him.

… He may not understand what exactly Axel is, but there's one thing the Hand of the King knows for sure. If he had been anything less than this, they would all be dead right now.

Slowly, Jon dismounts while calling for one of his still-living men to collect the reins of the nearby steeds and make sure they will still have four able-bodied mounts to take them the rest of the way to King's Landing. Then, he walks through the bloody battlefield that this stretch of the Kingsroad has become, striding right up to Axel.

"... Kneel, Axel."

Blinking, Axel furrows his brow in confusion. Still, after a moment of awkward silence, he follows Jon's orders and kneels. Drawing his own

sword from his side, Jon lets out a shuddering breath. He's an old man at this point. Not much of a fighter anymore.

But he's lived a long life… and part of that life gives him the right to do this. Not just as Lord of the Eyrie and Lord Paramount of the Vale, nor just as Hand of the King… but also as a Knight of the Seven Kingdoms. Even if, admittedly, it's been a long time since Jon last swung a blade.

"For showing extreme valor in a battle thought to be lost, for defending against renegade knights who have forsaken their vows… I knight you, Axel Baratheon."

Bringing the sword up, he places it on Axel's right shoulder.

"In the name of the Warrior, I charge you to be brave."

Moving the sword to the left, he continues.

"In the name of the Father, I charge you to be just."

Moving the sword to the right again, he finishes up.

"In the name of the Mother, I charge you to defend the innocent."

Pulling his blade back, Jon smiles softly.

"Arise, Axel Baratheon, a knight of the Seven Kingdoms."

The words hang heavy in the air. It might seem pointless, given that Axel was bound for kinghood if they ever managed to make it to King's Landing… but sometimes pointless rituals were exactly what they needed.

As Axel stands up to his full height, Jon can see the gratitude in the younger man's eyes and knows that he's done the right thing.

Whatever Axel might be, he is first and foremost the next King of the Seven Kingdoms. That's all that matters in the end. Everything else… is secondary.

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A/N: Well now, Axel is a Knight, that's lovely. But more than that, he had to reveal his… 'true nature'. Dun dun duuuun~

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