Disclaimer: I don't own HP, GOT, or ASOIAF. Would have finished the last two properly if I had.
Edited by Bub3loka

8th Day of the 8th Moon, 303 AC

Jon Stark

Torrhen was heaving like a horse after a race, misty puffs escaping his mouth one after another. Two mornings had passed since his squire had begun running in full armour. While tired to the bone, not a word of complaint left his lips. Jon estimated it was one part pride and four parts pure stubbornness.

Pride or not, persistence was respectable, if not always for the right reasons. Still, if stubbornness could be aimed properly, it became a boon, not a hindrance. With time, Jon would mould this stubbornness into perseverance or even determination.

Now, Jon had to toe the fine line. Too much pressure and Torrhen would shatter and break; too little, and he would never reach his full potential. Teaching someone was like working on a raw piece of ore. It took time, effort, and knowledge. If you failed, your student would be like a badly forged blade shattering with the blow. But if you gave your all and succeeded…

The human body was a wondrous thing that could adapt to many things, and adolescence was the prime time for all growth. Jon would not demand anything but the best from his squire.

After the tiring run, sparring followed.

With a sigh, Jon gently struck out with his blunted tourney sword, whacking the tired Torrhen on the exposed side. The boy grunted in pain but tried to batter him with his axe. Jon sidestepped the heavy blow, twisted, and rammed his shoulder into him, sending the boy sprawling into the snow.

“Never lower your guard, no matter how tired you are, unless you intend to bait your opponent,” Jon said as he effortlessly pulled him up. “And be careful not to overcommit your attacks. If your opponent knocks you to the ground, he can easily pin and stab you through the gaps in your armour. Go to Beryl for another meal, and you can rest for the day aside from Wolkan’s lessons.”

For a short while, Jon watched as Torrhen stubbornly dragged his feet towards the kitchens. The boy had talent, and teaching him was more fulfilling than he expected.

Sighing, Jon made his way to the royal carpenter, a skilled craftsman by the name of Elan who had come from Barrowton. The joiner’s workshop was a building with a neatly decorated facade of polished oak, nestled at the west edge of Wintertown, facing the sawmills that provided him with fresh wood. Elan was the best joiner in the North, or so he boasted. Perhaps there was some truth to it—the work was worthy of royal patronage, so he had recruited the man.

Inside, greeted him the scent of freshly shaved timber, oak, ash, pine, and many more he could not name, mingling together.

“Your Grace.” Elan bowed clumsily, but his face lit up with enthusiasm. “It was quite the task to get all this in time, but I have it all here, prepared and ready.”

A few days prior, he had ordered shafts hewn from various woods, ranging from the common ones found across each corner of the realm to ironwood from the North, nightwood from Essos, and the very rare goldenheart from the Summer Islands, all samples of different lengths and sizes. Even a few blocks of weirwood purposed from fallen branches—the only way to harvest the precious wood without treading on the grounds of sacrilege.

And here they were, displayed on a large bundle on the carpenter's long table.

"Yet…" The master carpenter's eyes flicked at the blocks, hesitating for a long moment. "Those are pretty enough to look at, but nothing more, Your Grace. It would require additional touch to carve them into something useful—or pretty enough to be worthy royal patronage."

"They're good as they are," Jon said. "Wrap them up for me, and don't worry. It's just a whim of mine that I wish to entertain."

Half an hour later, he was in the privacy of the godswood, inspecting the shafts before the heart tree.

Wandmaking was far from a simple whim. It was an art form that demanded years of study and practice to master. But to the men living here, all sorcery was a distant, dangerous thing only spoken of in the old tales or by travellers from the far east.

Perhaps they were right. Magic was as dangerous as it was fleeting and wild, or at least it was so without a wand. This was why Jon desired to make one of his own. While it wouldn't bolster his powers directly, it would enable him to wield what he had with far greater ease and allow him access to complex sorcery that demanded a focus.

But making a wand was easier said than done. But now that Jon had dealt with the most urgent issues demanding his attention, he could invest his time in it. Alas, his knowledge of wandlore was poor, but he knew the very basics. Four characteristics dominated a wand, he knew—the wood, the core, the length, and the bend, that is to say, how pliant and flexible it was in the hand.

"How hard could it be?" he muttered to himself, though even as the words left his lips, he knew better.

Three hours later, in the Godswood, Jon channelled his magic into the yew wand and—

Bang!

The wand exploded, and he barely managed to shield his eyes with his arm.

A hiss of pain escaped from his lips as blood began to trickle down his face, and he looked at his hand. The wand had exploded with significant power, turning the very wood that encased the core into splinters that had torn at him. His fingers were shattered, all bent at an awkwardly painful angle, though that was more to the strength of the blast. Up the elbow, dark blood oozed from over a dozen tears, and a piece of wood had embedded itself into Jon's forehead, just above his right eye. The pulsing pain in his skull told him the wound went deeper than the flesh. Hairline fractures.

His left arm was no better, torn and bleeding by the splinters—more than a dozen of them embedded into his flesh. Half a heartbeat slower, and it would have struck his eye, possibly killing him instantly. Jon

dreaded to imagine what would have happened if his skin, bones, and muscles were not harder and denser than most.

Jon Stark did not mind dying in battle while fighting for a cause he believed in. But a foolish death like this?

It was as humiliating as it was dreadful.

“Obsidian is no good for a core,” he murmured under his breath as he plucked the bits and pieces of yew out of his flesh with his good hand and focused his magic. His flesh and bones began to knit together as he forced his mangled fingers into proper shape.

Perhaps it was time to don his armour for this, lest he risk his life each time his experiments blew up in his face. His respect for skilled masters of the craft like Ollivander grew.

It was humbling. When had he been so close to death because of a mix of daring and a lack of knowledge?

Though his woes went far deeper. Sorcery was scarce here, and items and beasts magical enough to serve as core scarcer. He had placed his hopes on obsidian…

Perhaps he could try a few gemstones. But jewels were weaker cores than unicorn tail hairs, phoenix feathers, or dragon heartstrings.

Alas, unicorns here were just shaggy goats with a single horn; there were no phoenixes, and Jon would not butcher his dragons for a heartstring. This doomed his endeavour to inferior materials. The road to crafting a wand would be long and full of trial and error…

After half an hour, all the injuries were gone, and Jon was as good as new… though he had to get a change of garments. The plain tunic and linen trousers would not be mourned, but the cloak Sansa had gifted him was another matter. It fluttered as the cool wind drifted through the tears in the fabric.

“Damn it!”

His torn garments were turned to cinder quickly enough, but he set aside the cloak. Perhaps it could be fixed. Gods, if magic had worked properly, he could have fixed it back with a wave of the wand. But he was wandless, and magic here was broken, twisted. Dreading the look of disappointment on Sansa’s face, Jon rummaged through his bag for another set of plain clothing and pulled it on. All the wand sticks were slipped inside, as Jon’s mood soured too much to continue trying.

Such a dangerous thing had to be considered with a rested and clear mind. While he could suppress his frustrations, it would not mean they would be gone, which could also affect his magic. His mindset needed to be adjusted, and so did his armour.

As he drifted through the grove, the king was waylaid by the young Alyn Woolfield.

“Your Grace!” Wyman’s page was red-faced and short of breath as he did a hasty bow. “The Hand bade me—something urgent demands—!”

“Very well,” Jon said, placing a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Take a good breath, Alyn. Measure your pace next time—you can hardly deliver messages if you’re too tired to speak.”

The boy looked at him like he had hung the stars from the sky.

Shaking his head, Jon made way to the council chamber. The old merman was already there, and Wolkan was beside him, fretful in his drab grey robes and clutching a small roll of parchment in his weathered fingers.

“It came half an hour ago,” Wyman said, meaty face unreadable. “From Casterly Rock.”

Surely enough, it was sealed by the roaring lion of Lannister with a wax that glittered like gold in the light. Had Cersei stopped clinging to the crowned stag of Baratheon at last? It would certainly pour oil into the rumours of her children’s parentage. Or perhaps enough years and too many rumours had passed that few would care. Jon certainly didn’t.

The wax cracked under his fingers as Jon furled open the parchment, eyes darting across the letters.

With a scoff, he tossed it on the varnished table. “The daring of that woman!”

“Cersei Lannister, then,” the Hand murmured, his brows knitted together. “Her pride has only grown further after her husband’s demise. Demands, I wager.”

“You wager well,” Jon said darkly. “She demands I go to Casterly Rock with Sansa and pay homage to her boy king.”

Wolkan cleared his throat as an odd look settled on his face. “Perhaps this means the Lannisters do not know Princess Arya has returned.”

The hand inclined his head. “Perhaps. They have yet to insert a spy in Winterfell; otherwise, she would have known about the dragons, and the demands would be more subtle… to a point. A woman like Cersei Lannister wouldn’t recognise subtlety if it slapped her in the face.”

“It’s a trap, that much is plain to see.” Jon’s lips curled in distaste. “I know of her ilk. It will be easy to walk into Casterly Rock, but hard to leave without irons clasped around my hands or good name. Perhaps my sister will not leave at all, left behind as a ‘*guest*’ for my good behaviour.”

“I believe much the same, Your Grace. The scheming Lannisters have shown their words mean little. Promises of gold, peace, and reconciliation all ring hollow. How should we proceed?”

His fingers drummed on the table. “There is no haste to respond. It’s not like I can fly over to Casterly Rock right away.”

“But you can, Your Grace,” Wyman said dryly. “Though I would imagine it would give Cersei quite the fright.”

Jon laughed despite himself.

Truth be told, he really hadn’t thought of Cersei and the rest of the Lannisters. To him, the proud lions of the Westerlands were a small matter at best, and he had far bigger woes to fret over. Once his power grew enough, even their vaunted Casterly Rock would not stop him. He knew three ways to summon a meteor, and at least one would work here.

His gaze settled on Wolkan.

The old maester was cleverer and more loyal than most, if a bit too jittery at times—though that probably came hand in hand with serving in the Dreadfort. His work here had been honest as it had been heartfelt, and Jon had not expected to see the old maester to give his all and then some. But he had, and with two moons of observation, the king concluded the man was no spy. His origins couldn't be any more ordinary—a third son of a scribe from Seaguard, and he had studied hard at the Citadel.

With six silver links hanging on his chain, Wolkan was one short of becoming an Archmaester of medicine. Yet he had been sent to the Dreadfort for life, a banishment in all but name. A part of it was a disagreement with one of the standing Archmaester, and the other had been the lack of strong backing, or so Edwyle Locke claimed.

Jon was inclined to believe his new spymaster in this. If Wolkan had connections or backing, he would have been in a castle of import.

The Conclave of Archmaesters traditionally chose the Grand Maesters. They would doubtlessly try to do the same for him once his rule was acknowledged. Fools. As if he would allow some crotchety old fossils with more pride than sense to meddle in his affairs from the far end of Westeros.

Jon's gaze was fixed on Wolkan. The old maester couldn't look more ordinary even if he tried, though his grey robe was always kept tidy. But the more he looked, the more he liked what he saw. Who did not want a capable and loyal servant?

"Wolkan," the king said. "I find myself in need of a Grand Maester to serve my council. What say you?"

The maester blinked once, twice, and then took a knee. "It is an honour, Your Grace. I will serve the Northern crown with all the strength my old bones have left."

As if he hadn't served loyally until now.

"The royal council grows stronger still," Wyman said, raising his cup in a toast. "Welcome into our ranks, Grandmaester Wolkan."

"I'm just doing my duty," the newly minted grandmaester said with a groan as he stood back up.

"Aren't we all?" The Hand smiled, but his heart did not seem to be in it, and then he turned to Jon, all grim-faced. "I advise caution, Your Grace, even when the Lannisters have stumbled, losing much of the power they wielded before. The lions have scarcely respected the laws of god and men when it could bring them victory."

He did not speak of it, but the meaning was clear. Even Wyman would never forget the Red Wedding, that terrible day where the most sacred rite of hospitality had been trampled down by a Frey under Lannister orders, and for what? It was an easy victory against House Stark, yes, but it had shed the last pretence of courtesy in the ugliest of ways, and the price still haunted Casterly Rock to this day. It would haunt them for much longer, Jon suspected.

Alas, the old lion and his grandson had been dead for nearly two years, and Jon's fury had long turned to ice. There was no need to be wroth at the dead and the rotting. But precautions needed to be taken.

House Lannister had indeed proved their word worthless, even though Tywin Lannister had openly denied any involvement in the Red Wedding.

“Tighten the guard in Winterfell further,” Jon ordered. “Employ trustworthy food and ale testers and have Ser Brynden inspect everyone who enters. Mark their names, too. Make all the lords know to do the same and beware of suspicious folk, especially those from the South.”

“It shall be done,” Wyman said, quickly scratching down the orders on a roll of parchment.

“Some maesters or their acolytes might have divided loyalties,” Wolkan added quietly. “Bastards, third, fourth, fifth sons, or hailing from cadet branches of southern houses, and they might have abandoned their name when forging their links, but blood runs thicker than vows. And many of those who hail from humbler origins were forced to rely on patrons to make do in Oldtown and the Citadel…”

Manderly nodded along, his meaty jowls shaking with distress. Jon had not thought of it, but it seemed obvious now that it had been spoken. He had not taken a second look at the maesters before.

Why would he?

Luwin had been a loyal Stark man through and through, Wolkan was everything a maester was supposed to be, and Aemon had been a sage old man who did his very best to serve despite being born a prince.

Did Jon have to look behind his back all the time?

Perhaps not. But caution was prudent. Maesters were like all other men—some good, some bad, and most of them a shade of grey. Forewarned was forearmed, and his trust had long dwindled to nought. The punishment for treason was death. While Jon was willing to bury previous grievances, any new transgressions would be repaid in full.

Yet his annoyance did not lessen in the slightest. The more he peered underneath, the more he realised Westeros was one enormous tangle of old powers and interests. While some were open and straightforward, like the highlords and kings, others were far more subtle but no less dangerous. Not dissimilar to his previous world.

Worse, as a king, he could not afford to close his eyes and ears to any of it. Some fools would claim that ignorance is bliss, but they were wrong. Ignorance was a weakness, and in this cruel world, weakness was a sin.

“Very well,” Jon exhaled slowly, “warn my lords and chieftains to keep vigil over their maesters and acolytes until their true loyalties are known. Especially those hailing from the South.”

The crown felt especially heavy on his head today, but it was the burden he had chosen to bear.

9th Day of the 8th Moon, 303 AC

Myrcella

She had to rub the blurriness from her eyes and blink a few times for the ceiling to come into focus.

Why were the varnished planks covering her ceiling the wrong shade of oak?

Her mood quickly soured as Myrcella remembered she was in Winterfell’s Great Keep, a guest in name and a hostage in truth.

She stood but quickly winced as her head throbbed from the sudden movement. Had she drunk too much ale yesterday? She vaguely remembered draining cup after cup of ale last night.

What were they celebrating again?

Her mind still felt jumbled as she tried to recall the previous day's events while donning her thick woollen gown. It was a cumbersome thing to clothe herself again, but one Myrcella had gotten used to. It could be worse, she told herself. The walls of the Great Keep were warm, and she couldn't feel the cold sting from winter inside. Most Northmen had it worse.

She stepped before her leaded glass mirror and fought her tangled hair with the bristle brush until she no longer looked like half a scarecrow. She didn't fully succeed—no hours of brushing would make the heavy bags under her eyes go away, or would mend her missing ear. The jagged scar running from her chin to her ear sat across her face like a silver blazon, mocking her efforts. She would never be pretty again, not truly.

Myrcella stumbled her way towards Shireen's chambers to join her friend… when it struck her full force.

The haze from her memories finally lifted. Five days earlier, Shireen soared to the sky atop the purple dragon. Two nights prior, she had been announced as the future Northern Queen, and the celebrations had been going strong ever since. Or perhaps it was three nights. She couldn't tell after the days had slowly started to blur together. That or the dull ache in her head.

The Northmen seemed to relish the reason to celebrate the coming wedding, though Myrcella couldn't say if they liked Stannis's daughter as a queen or because they just sought out each ounce of joy they could find in the drab coldness of the North.

Of course, Cella had dined together with Shireen. Her friend was still bedridden, but her face was pale no longer, and her mood couldn't be better—all smiles. Shireen even laughed thrice, which was quite the feat, considering Myrcella had never heard the girl laugh before.

Gods, she was not touching that strong Northern ale ever again.

Her mind drifted towards the beasts that had made her friend a queen, the most powerful woman in the North. In the Seven Kingdoms, soon enough. There was something sweet to the idea of mastering a dragon, but the bandages covering Shireen's legs made her shudder. Myrcella hailed from the same lineage, and perhaps she could mount Bloodfyre and have a dragon of her own…

She didn't dare entertain the thought. Perhaps if she had been the first. Being a queen of the North would be a better fate than she could have ever hoped for after the Darkstar. She could give the Demon of Winterfell strong sons, kings and princes and dragonriders in their own name. Yet there was something dangerous to Jon Stark, something in his very eyes frightened Myrcella down to her very bones. The crimson drake had an escort of burly Northmen shadowing its every movement, too.

Truth be told, nothing had changed for Cersei's daughter, and she was glad for it.

The implications, however, went far deeper.

Who could force the North to bend the knee now? Even Torrhen Stark had only knelt because he had no way to fight the dragonlords and was loath to see his subjects and home burn. Yet, with three dragons, Jon Stark had no such fears.

Word was the king harboured no ambition for the South, and even Shireen had never spoken of claiming her father or royal uncle's crown. The Northmen loved them more for it, but Myrcella struggled to believe it. Perhaps it was not a lack of ambition but plain expediency, with that mythical foe from the fairy tales looming beyond the Wall.

There were no grumkins, snarks, or ice spiders the size of bears, but the wights and their icy masters seemed real enough. Something had frightened the boastful wildlings that did not flinch even before the finest warriors the North could bring, that much Myrcella believed. While many Northmen seemed solemn and grim-faced, there was no despair or fear in their eyes. Perhaps it was the king's dragons. Some had even begun to call it the War of Ice and Fire in their cups, but always out of earshot of the king.

If anything, she believed that whatever was prowling in the snows beyond the Wall couldn't be scarier than Jon Stark. Myrcella had seen the Mountain and the Hound, and neither felt half as dangerous as the king. His savage dragon with the wicked scales of deep blue streaked with black, aptly named Winter, was bigger and more feral-looking than his siblings and gave a whole new meaning to House Stark's words.

But Myrcella had a plan for the dragons. It wasn't particularly complex, but she believed it was quite wise. It mainly involved staying far away from their fangs, spiky tails, wings, and a certain purple menace.

Then, there were the Seven Kingdoms that were still alight with the fires of war. King's Landing was a cursed ruin, and the Iron Throne was gone, but the kings and claims still remained. But a king mend the realm and heal the fractures and hatred brewed from this war?

If the North could break away from the crown, what stopped the Vale or Dorne from doing the same? The Iron Islands were already in open rebellion with a second king crowned, and there was no fleet left in the Sunset Sea to bring them to heel.

If bastards were supposed to be creatures of lust, sin, and greed, why wasn't Jon Stark scheming and grasping for more?

He had the dragons, which would grow further, and now he had also wed Shireen's claim.

Some whispered that the Northern King was a peaceful and merciful man, but… Myrcella disagreed.

Maybe when spring came, he would fly down South and force them all to kneel, claims of peace be damned.

The guards in front of Shireen's quarters had swelled both in size and number. Before, there were four. Now, they were eight—all bigger and meaner than before and clad in steel from head to toe.

Myrcella shrank under their sharp, flinty eyes, and it took her a few moments to gather her courage and step forward.

Some Northmen didn't care that she was Cersei's daughter, but many others held only hatred for her. Yet no matter how angry they looked or their gazes filled with loathing, none of the Northmen would dare lay a finger upon her after the king had given her bread and salt. Such a vile thing would make them as bad as a Frey, and Jon Stark had shown his distaste for defiance aplenty.

However, the eight burly men before her were barely different from blocks of stone. Their faces were unreadable, and their eyes gave nothing away.

The guardsmen announced her presence, and she was quickly allowed in.

“Good morning, Cella!” Shireen chirped from her bed. She was sitting, her shoulders covered with a thick fur-lined cloak.

Gods, how was she so fresh? Did her friend not drink last night?

“I drank only a single cup,” the future queen said with a smile. Myrcella blinked. Had she spoken out loud? “Yes, you did. The Maester forbade me to drink any more than that.”

“Do you know how to deal with the morning ache after?” Myrcella cleared her throat as her cheeks burned.

Her friend nodded and tugged the silken cord, and the bell rang. Before long, hurried footsteps came from outside. Shireen’s new personal maid was a plump young serving woman with brown hair and a homely face.

“Meraya, bring us a double serving of bacon, cheese, salmon, and a jug of lemonwater.”

“Yes, Yer Grace.” The woman curtsied and scurried away to her task.

Myrcella lazily stretched to relieve the stiffness in her shoulders.

“I thought you disliked fish?”

“The river salmon from the White Knife is too delicious to dislike,” Shireen said, her smile softening. “Ser Davos said it also helps after a night of drinking.”

If nothing else, the old smuggler would know about drinking and fish. Gods, Shireen was always so kind and considerate. Warmth crept into Myrcella’s heart, and she leaned to hug her friend. The future Queen of the North was soft and warm.

“I have no maiden cloak,” Shireen whispered. “The three cloaks Bartheon could boast are at Dragonstone, King’s Landing, and Storm’s End, so I must make one myself. Would you help me?”

“Of course!” Myrcella beamed. Making the maiden cloak was a great honour. “Will you be using your father's sigil or—”

“No.” The denial came like a whip, swift and merciless as Shireen’s eyes turned stormy. “I do not follow the Red God. My cloak shall bear the crowned stag of House Baratheon.”

Gods, Shireen’s stern face looked *scary*. If the rumours were true, Stannis had tried to see her fed to the red god’s flames, tearing all ties of kinship. But perhaps that was why the soft-spoken Shireen was so… furious.

The uneasy silence was broken when the handmaid barreled back into the room with a tray filled to the brim with steaming food and placed it on Shireen’s bed before leaving. Just as they were about to eat, something big and white stirred at the edge of her vision.

It took all of Myrcella's self-control not to jump and scream. Why did the king's direwolf have to be here again?!

"Oh, you have nothing to be afraid of, Cella." Shireen's voice had softened like velvet, her previous severity forgotten.

"If you say so," Myrella muttered, still eyeing the beast in case he decided she looked like a snack. The bloody direwolf was a whole head and a half taller than her when standing. "Is that why I hear the men-at-arms --how he chewed through bone and steel as if it were straw and ripped off the limbs of both men and horses in the Battle for Winterfell?"

The direwolf in question was just swaying his shaggy white tail languidly while his nose was studying the tray of food Meraya had bought with great interest. Her friend had claimed he could sniff out poison and other harmful things. Ghost looked soft and fluffy, like an oversized puppy, but Myrcella would not be deceived.

Shireen huffed. "Well, he hasn't attacked anyone outside of battle. Jon has trained him more than well." It was no longer 'the King' or 'His Grace' but '*Jon*'. It was said with stars in her eyes, too.

Myrcella knew she had to be glad for her friend, but seeing her so bright, so cheery… it stung. Hopefully, Shireen would find more happiness in the crown and marriage than their mothers ever did.

"Gods, Cella, don't be such a baby. For the hundredth time, you have nothing to fear from Ghost. Come, give me your hand."

Fighting the urge to flee screaming, Myrcella begrudgingly surrendered her hand. Shireen's warm fingers grasped around her wrist as she guided her palm to the white direwolf's maw. His big, wet nose inspected her hand for a heartbeat.

The ticklish lick saw a pitched giggle slip from her lips. Then, Ghost lazily lay his enormous head on the covers.

Shireen pulled her hand again and dragged her fingers through the white fur.

Soft!

The fur had nothing to do with the coarse hairs most beasts sprouted. Instead, it was softer than silk, smoother than butter, and free of tangles.

"Are you brushing his fur?" Myrcella asked despite herself.

"I was tempted a few times." Shireen's smile grew rueful as her fingers reached the snowy ear. "But it would be useless. Somehow, his fur is like this on its own."

Myrcella decided the direwolf was too soft and fluffy to be scary and hesitantly started petting his neck.

"Shouldn't we send Meraya to fetch some food for him, too?"

"I tried giving him some venison before, but he scarcely eats it." Shireen frowned, tugging on her braid. "I think Ghost prefers hunting. Some nights, the guards open the door for him, and he runs out into the wolfswood."

The direwolf gave a silent, lazy yawn and languidly retreated to his previous place, curling by the roaring hearth again.

“This is good.” Myrcella proclaimed after swallowing a warm bite of salmon. It's rich, buttery taste melded with a sliver of lemon and garlic, and the meat melted onto her tongue. The cook had taken special care to remove the bones, so she did not need to pick apart the meat with her fingers.

Why had she not tried such a dish in King’s Landing or Sunspear before? They had the Blackwater Rush and the Greenblood; surely they had river salmon? She still missed the Dornish spices, but this was just as good.

Shireen was scarfing down what looked like a double serving with a fierce appetite. Gods, where did all that food go? She was thin and willowy, and Myrcella had seen ladies far plumper who ate less.

“Beryl, the royal cook, knows what he’s doing,” the black-haired maiden explained between the bites.

The rest of the meal was spent in silence, and just as they finished, the guards outside announced the entry of the royal squire. A moment later, the door creaked open, and Torrhen Flint hobbled inside, still clad in full plate like a knight on a tourney.

“Lady Myrcella, His Grace has requested your presence.”

A most polite way to word a royal summons. Sighing, she gathered her skirts and rose from her seat.

Truthfully, Myrcella had no inkling why the king would demand her presence. Shireen could think of a few options, but all of them were rather dreadful.

As a hostage, the king could wed her away as he wished. Myrcella could do nothing but comply.

Her mother could have done something foolish again, and now her head was in danger of being parted from her neck.

Or perhaps it was something more insidious that Shireen had failed to mention—the king wanted to despoil her. It wouldn’t be the first time a royal bedded a hostage. The Unworthy had lain with Lady Cassella Vaith for almost three years in the Red Keep.

Jon Stark did not look like a man interested in pursuits of the flesh—his gaze held no desire, and his eyes did not wander. Of course, Myrcella knew the look of lechers and lusty men. Her own father had it almost always plastered on his face, openly groping the servants and handmaids no matter the time and place and leering at their chests. However, she was scarred and ugly, just like Shireen.

Perhaps the Northern king liked his maidens scarred and ugly?

Regardless, the royal summons heralded a change. Whatever the reason, the king now wanted to talk to her, an interest he had never shown before. Myrcella hated change, for it had the nasty tendency to turn for the worse. Although her current circumstances left much to be desired, she was happier than she had been before. Winterfell was peaceful and pleasant in its own cold way, and Shireen was better company than most.

When Cersei's daughter reached the royal solar, her heart was still heavy. But the guardsman gave her a curt nod, pushing the door open. Trudging inside with her eyes lowered, Myrcella was soon suffering the brunt of Jon Stark's suffocating presence not only alone but up close.

The king was clad in a sleek pitch-black plate, and the helm and gloves rested on the desk just within arm's reach. Myrcella's mouth turned dry. Who wore armour in their solar?!

It was as if Jon Stark was preparing for battle. A white direwolf head snarled at her in vivid detail from the centre of the breastplate, as if ready to lunge and tear her throat out.

Despite the martial attire, his gauntlet was squeezing a feather that scratched on a roll of parchment with surprising precision.

If nothing else, she wasn't being despoiled today. The thought brought her no joy. There were worse ways to lose her maidenhead than a handsome and dangerous king. What good was saving her virtue for her future husband when he would probably spurn her like Trystane?

Besides, Jon Stark was kind to his sisters, so being the royal paramour didn't sound half as bad as getting wedded to some minor lord or landed knight.

Myrcella did her finest curtsy, forcing a smile on her face.

"You called for me, Your Grace?" She tried speaking with her silkiest courtesy, but her voice betrayed her nervousness and cracked towards the end.

"Sit, princess," he said, raising his face. Purple eyes met green as she cautiously settled on the tapered chair. It was rather plain compared to those in Sunspear and the Red Keep, but no less comfortable. "Do you miss your mother?"

The question caught her flat-footed.

"Not truly, Your Grace," Myrcella said with all the honesty she could muster. "Cersei Lannister was not what you could call a loving and attentive mother." Unless your name was Joffrey. Myrcella had seen the results of her mother's heartfelt attempts at nurturing and wanted none of it.

The king nodded curtly.

"An interesting letter arrived from the Lady of Casterly Rock." A scroll with the broken seal of Lannister was placed before her. "Read it."

Myrcella unfurled it with trepidation, and her eyes widened the more she read.

…demands your and your sister's presence at Casterly Rock….All previous transgressions shall be forgiven when you bend the knee…

Cersei Lannister, Lady of Casterly Rock and Regent of Tommen Baratheon

"What...is to happen to me now?" she asked, shrinking into her seat.

Curse her foolish mother. Trying to summon a dragonrider like he was some dog to be ordered and kicked around? Wait. Did Cersei even know Jon Stark had three dragons?

“We hold Guest Right sacred in the North.” Jon Stark cocked his head. “As for now? You shall write a letter to your mother.”

It was an order, not a request.

Myrcella obeyed. Inking down a few sentences was easy enough, and she took the offered quill and an empty roll of parchment.

“I would love to write a letter to my mother.” The lie burned on her tongue. “What should I tell her?”

The king nodded, looking pleased with her compliance.

“Write that you’re alive and well here in Winterfell,” he said. “Perhaps imply some moment or memory only the two of you would know. Oh, and I shall require some of your hair.”

Myrcella paled, her free hand flying to her golden locks. Her hair was the only good thing left to her. The last token of the beauty she had once been.

“Why?” she asked, her voice cracking.

“Proof.” The king’s purple eyes softened, reminding Myrcella of the sweet lavender in spring. “Fret not, I shall not harm you—just a single lock shall do.”

13th day of the 8th Moon

The Spider, near Harrenhal

Word of the Battle for Oldtown had arrived a few days prior. A brutal, ugly scramble of death and destruction and a third of the city was said to have burned down. The Citadel and the Starry Sept had been spared from the fire but not from the fighting. The death toll was said to have reached over ten thousand in fighters alone and five times as many in civilians. The House of Hightower had bled in that battle, too.

Yet it was only a reason for celebration—Daenerys had called for a two-day feast. Even the Unsullied were gifted with casks of wine. With Hightower and Oldtown weakened, the Reach was weak. The demise of the King of Salt and Rock and the Iron Fleet meant the Sunset Sea and the Iron Islands were ripe for the taking.

Everyone celebrated Euron Greyjoy's fall, even his own niece, Asha. Not three days after, Balon Greyjoy’s daughter was already sailing home to reclaim Pyke. If she succeeded, it would be the first kingdom sworn to Daenerys Targaryen.

The lords of the Narrow Sea paid homage to the Dragon Queen, but their strength had been broken along with Stannis. A few green boys, daughters, and widows were left to pick up the pieces, and they could offer nought but paltry support. The newly ascended Lord Harrold Arryn was content to stay in the Vale and sit out the fighting like his predecessors. Aegon had Dorne, the Stormlands, and the Crownlands and was now prying the Riverlands out of the lion’s jaws. The Reach remained out of grasp even after the losses sustained in the Desolation of King’s Landing, and the North was too broken and far away to do anything.

Yet the rumours from the land of the cold and snow were disturbing.

A battle had been fought there, between Bolton and Jon Snow, and the word from merchants was that the Bastard of Winterfell had triumphed and declared himself king. Rumours came easily enough, but the truth was far harder to ascertain.

Varys cursed his inability to insert his little birds into the cold wasteland. Even in White Harbour, they were quick to expire within days, or the city guard found them and put them on a ship back to Essos.

Regardless, one king was gone, but another had sprouted like a shroom after a rain. Yet Daenerys and most councillors did not seem worried about the newly crowned Jon Stark the Third.

Why would they be?

After all, the North was a spent force, and how well could an oath-breaking bastard hold a kingdom where the weight of your word measured your worth? When Daenerys and her dragons came, he would burn like the Gardener king or bend the knee like Torrhen Stark.

Few paid the broken North any heed, but to his surprise, one of the councillors was unsettled.

“I rode with the boy once, on his way to the Wall,” Tyrion said when Varys had brought it all up. “Sullen and solemn to a fault, but not without cunning hiding underneath, if green enough to piss grass. The Bastard of Winterfell is a creature of duty; otherwise, he would not have been eager to don the black.”

Selmy merely offered a calm nod. “Then there is little to fear from a Snow in Winterfell.”

Yet the dwarf took a deep mouthful of wine and chortled darkly.

“Is there? I saw the Wall, Lord Hand.” The Imp’s face twisted into an ugly smile. “It’s a harsh, merciless place, where the weak break and only the hardy survive. Five years have passed since Jon Snow, and the boy has grown into a man. The foolish don’t rise to become a Lord Commander, nor do they hold a castle against overwhelming odds.”

“Admirable for someone his age,” the old knight said lightly. “But what do the wildlings know of warcraft? Numbers would be useless against the Wall. The Starks are honourable, but surely the boy would see that fighting is folly, just like his ancestor.”

Tyrion took another swallow from his flask and shook his head.

“My father thought Robb Stark was a green boy playing at war, too. He thought that his march into the Riverlands was folly, a boy’s tantrum,” he mused. “*Everyone* did, until the Young Wolf started ripping victory after victory, smashing his way through commanders older and more experienced than him. Many were relieved when word of his demise arrived, no matter how ignoble.”

“Why speak of a dead man, then?” Asha Greyjoy quirked a brow. “The Young Wolf is nought but a ghost that lingered around the Riverlands, a dying echo of vainglory.”

“The same ghost might haunt us still,” Tyrion said, but there was no jest in his tone this time. “Many sing Eddard Stark high praises for his honour, and then mock him a fool for it in the next breath. But they forget that the same honour he is mocked for had him raise his bastard alongside his heir, from martial training to lordly tutoring and other lessons. It sounded like folly back then, but now?”

Tyrion took another swig before continuing, "*Everything* Robb Stark learned at his father's knee? Jon Snow also knows it. But he is not as green or as young as his dead brother, and all of Robb and Eddard Stark's mistakes are laid bare before him, as a warning and a lesson."

This talk had happened a week prior, and Daenerys and the others had not taken heed to Tyrion's dark words. Not Varys. The Imp was a good judge of character, and if he thought Jon Snow could be an obstacle, Varys had to take action.

Alas, his options to infiltrate the North were limited, even if his efforts had tripled.

There were more pressing worries on his mind—the North was far away, out of sight and mind, while the meeting with Aegon was drawing nearer by the minute. Today was the day. The sky was clear, except for a handful of clouds gathering in the far north. Autumn was dwindling, the days were growing shorter and shorter, and even the sun grew weaker still.

"The day is too fine to be so nervous, Varys," Tyrion quipped as they rode to a far hill overlooking Harren's folly. The hill where his plans would come to fruition or be broken for good.

"Today can turn ugly," the Spider said in a low voice. "Our Queen has kept her plans close to her heart."

The Imp was solemn today—or more solemn than usual, his biting words were still there, if slightly more measured. Clad in clean red velvet, he did not carry his wine flask, and even his tangled beard and shaggy hair had been trimmed and groomed properly.

"Such is the life in service of the crown." Tyrion let out a low chuckle, doubtlessly finding this whole situation amusing. "It's like an unopened gift. Full of surprises, and you don't know what's inside until you unwrap it all. One would think you would have gotten used to it, for this is the fifth monarch you have pledged to serve."

"Some masters are easier to serve than others," Varys murmured, shuffling uneasily on his seat.

"Don't I know it." Tyrion shook his head, exasperated. Then he leaned in closely, his voice dripping with curiosity. "So, which one do you dread more? That they'll decide to fight or that they'll decide to fuck?"

Varys's mouth twitched despite himself.

"Would that I know what happens in the mind of our queen," he sighed. "Her Grace has shown herself mercurial as of late and unwilling to listen to wise counsel, especially on this matter."

Tyrion shrugged carelessly. "Well, I'd say we should brace ourselves for the worst. At most, our Queen will want to bring the whole of Westeros to heel with three dragons and our paltry host. The Conqueror reborn, but a tad shorter and with teats this time."

"It is not the same, and you know it, my lord. Aegon might have commanded fewer men when he first set foot on Westeros, but his dragons were bigger by far, both in size and might, and he had two sisters at his side in the sky."

Tyrion gave him a shallow nod this time, and then the previous amusement drained from his face faster than wine from his flask.

“Be as it might, we have already chosen our lot, and fretting is of no use,” he said dully, his mismatched eyes full of apathy. “We might as well enjoy the game, no matter where it leads us.”

Yet, for all of his quips and love of irony, the Imp was not wrong.

The die was cast, and he could only wait and watch where it would fall.

The climb up the hill was spent in silence. Barristan led the procession, flanked by scores of Unsullied, the queen’s bloodriders, and a handful of knights who had sworn their swords to Daenerys at Dragonstone.

Varys’s gaze wandered across the surroundings; the signs of the recent battle were clear. Mass graves were dug to bury the dead, and the pits had yet to be fully covered. The horses and mules had trampled or grazed most of the grass and weeds clean, and what little was left of the land had been stripped bare for leagues by both Lannister and Targaryen.

Harrenhal loomed on the horizon like a dark shadow. The five towers, half-melted and charred, looked like black fingers grasping towards the sky, standing strong even after centuries of disrepair. The symbol of dragon defiance that the Conqueror had gifted to the realm. It was almost beautiful in a twisted way.

An enormous red and black pavilion crowned the hill, rising on a platform of undressed wood. The planks below were covered with Myrish carpets, wolf pelts, and Vale wool, and in the middle stood a massive oaken table surrounded by tapered chairs.

Aegon waited on the other side, the Valyrian Steel crown of the Conqueror atop his brow, and Blackfyre was strapped on his belt. He was perfect. Tall, broad-shouldered, lithe, and garbed in a black and crimson doublet, with pale skin, bright purple eyes, and silver-gold hair.

Beside him hovered Jon Connington, looking stiff and cautious with his taut face. His fiery hair and beard were streaked with grey, and the Hand’s pin proudly graced his surcoat. His pale blue eyes burned a hole through Varys, and it seemed the proud Griffin Lord had not forgotten the indignity of his fake death even after all those years.

Lord Simon Staunton and Ser Nymor Jordayne were a step behind, along with two white cloaks. One had to be Rolly Duckfield, but Varys couldn’t recognise the other when clad in a full suit of armour with only a white cloak for heraldry. Another issue to rectify.

The wizened Hand and the rest of Daenerys’s councillors helped themselves to the empty side of the table, leaving the high chair in the middle for the Dragon Queen.

“Ser Barristan.” Connington stiffly nodded to the former kingsguard and studied their retinue with his harsh, pale eyes. “I do not see Princess Daenerys amongst your ranks.”

Alas, Ser Barristan Selmy looked half a decade older without armour and far more tired. Old dogs were slow to learn new tricks, and the old knight was far more used to wielding arms than shouldering a crown's burden and wrangling with a ruler’s wilfulness from up close.

“She’ll be here any moment now, Lord Connington,” the Hand said, face impassive. Even with a limping leg and no armour, Varys didn’t doubt the old knight was the most dangerous man in this pavilion.

Aegon shuffled uneasily, and his councilmen frowned, eyes glancing about fretfully. They were worried. Perhaps that was precisely what Daenerys had intended. She was still young, half a child, and resorted to proud yet empty posturing.

“Very well,” Aegon said. His face was even, but his eyes narrowed.

Gods, how quickly had his nephew grown to pride with the crown atop his head?

The minutes flew away, and the tension mounted… until Varys saw something on the horizon.

Soon enough, everyone else caught sight of it.

“Is that…?” Aegon’s face was full of awe, and he was far from the only one.

“It’s Her Grace, Daenerys Targaryen in all her royal glory,” Tyrion said lightly. “And her three dragons.”

They were indeed magnificent, and words failed to describe their grandeur. Varys could not get enough of looking at the dragons, no matter how often he had seen them before.

At least Daenerys had somehow corralled Viserion and Rhaegal to follow her commands. Her time flying with Drogon had borne fruit, and she was at ease in the saddle. The Black Menace, as some called it in hushed whispers, was slightly less unruly than Balerion had been said to be. The dragon’s temper was ruthless and savage, but Daenerys had mastered the beast. Mostly.

While the other two drakes circled above in the sky, Drogon landed thirty yards from the tent, the beat of his great black wings rattling the pavilion above them.

Aegon and his retinue turned cautious and grim. The first meeting with a ruler of the sky was always a sobering experience. Dragons made even the tallest of men feel small. Drogon’s fiendish red eyes that were like two sanguine pools could make even brave men who would not flinch in the face of death void their bowels.

Daenerys hooked off the chains that secured her to the saddle and dismounted with practised grace. Within a few moments, she strode into the pavilion, her wind-swept face unreadable.

“My Lords, *Aegon*,” she greeted plainly and took her place at the front of the table, right next to Barristan. *Aegon,* not *my nephew,* he noticed. Varys schooled his face to hide the unease swelling within his chest.

His gaze settled on the table, finding it absent the traditional platters with bread and salt, or the rainbow flag signifying parley. He was not the only one to take notice. Shoulders were squared, and hands were hovering over the sword hilts. It was not a denial of hospitality or a guarantee. No, the problem ran far deeper—the Red Wedding had worn down trust in the olden rites of hospitality.

Jon Connington was the first to speak from Aegon’s retinue. “His Grace might be your nephew, but he is a king, and you ought to address him as such, *princess*.”

Daenerys’s face grew icy.

“Who are you to tell me what I should or should not do?” She raised her chin, glancing at Connington as if he were some bug to be squashed beneath her boots.

Aegon placed a hand on the fuming Griffin Lord's shoulder, and the old lord stilled.

"Peace, Jon," he urged. "Aunt—"

"Peace?" Daenerys echoed, words as cold as the northern wind. "You claim to be Elia's son, but I've yet to see proof of it aside from the eunuch's words."

Aegon let out a long sigh. "Jon Connington was one of my father's closest friends—"

"Yes, yes." She waved her hand impatiently, as if to chase away a particularly vexing midge. "I've heard that tale before. It's a sweet song of loyalty and honour… but he came to raise you on the Spider's word years later, did he not?"

"What do you want me to say, Daenerys?" Aegon's voice was tight with frustration. "If you think Jon Connington has been deceived, if you do not trust that Varys had spirited me away from the Sack of King's Landing, then what? It's all the proof I possess. You either believe it, or you do not."

To Varys's surprise, her face lost some of its harshness.

"You speak truthfully," she nodded curtly. "But I am not so easily deceived. I have found a better way to discern the truthfulness of it all. Better than bold words and grand claims, at least."

Aegon shuffled, glancing around, while Connington turned weary.

"What is it?" the griffin lord demanded. "What is this mysterious way of confirming his lineage that you possess?"

"Ride one of my dragons," Daenerys said, a triumphant smile blooming across her face. "I shall call them here, and should you mount either of them and live, it will be proof enough that you're a true dragon, not some mummer."

Dread pooled in Varys's belly.

Connington looked livid. "This is *madness*."

"Is it?" Daenerys tilted her head. "Quentyn Martell, the descendant of my namesake, was savaged by one of my dragons when he foolishly approached them. But he was no more than a Dornishman with a sliver of dragon's blood. You should have no such woes if you are truly who you claim to be."

Jon Connington's face grew stormy, and he opened his mouth, but Aegon placed a hand on his elbow and turned to Daenerys.

"Truly?" he asked, voice full of steel. "Would you believe me if I mastered a dragon here and now?"

"Yes, nephew mine. Mount one of my dragons, and then we shall wed, and you can mount me in turn."

"I'll do it, Aunt," Aegon said eagerly. Too eagerly, the foolish, hot-headed boy. Gods, he had not even given it a moment of thought!

"Aegon." Jon Connington's voice had grown wary. "Even some dragonlords had to take their time to court their dragons before taking to the skies. The risk—"

“The risk is one I’m willing to take, Jon,” he said, face earnest. “I must dispel the doubt in my aunt’s mind for good, and this is not the time to hesitate.”

Daenerys’s smile only widened, and Varys did not know whether to be proud or angry with his nephew. He was not privy to his true identity, so his words were genuine, not an act.

But was it enough?

“Rhaegal! Viserion!”

Varys’ heart hammered against his ribs as he watched the flying drakes lazily descend, landing on the far side of the hill, away from Drogon.

Worse, Connington was not wrong. Having the blood of the dragon guaranteed nothing if the dragon refused to pick you. So many dragons had rejected Aemond the Kinslayer, even though none could deny his heritage. Where Addam Waters succeeded in mastering a dragon, his brother failed. Wild dragons, those who had yet to be mounted before, like Rhaegal and Viserion, were even less friendly to humans.

“So this is it!” Tyrion had found a flask of wine and took a generous swig as Aegon inched closer to the cream-scaled dragon. “Shall we witness another roasted royal, I wonder?”

“It’s in the capricious hands of the gods now,” Varys muttered, his mouth going dry.

Aegon approached slowly, now just fifteen yards away from the dragons. Heads tilted, Rhaegal and Viserion had turned to study the daring newcomer. There was no roaring or snarling yet. Varys allowed himself to believe.

Each step Aegon took made the Spider’s heart thunder like a war drum, and he prayed for the first time in his life. Varys, unable to look further, closed his eyes and prayed to whichever deity would listen—let his nephew succeed.

A gasp broke the silence, then a second, a third, and dozens more, and some began to cheer. Varys cautiously cracked his eyes open, only to see Aegon climb atop Viserion’s upper back just as the drake leapt into the air.