The Three-Headed Titan Chapter 17 (Paths of the Eldians)

The twisted towers of Harrenhal appeared on the horizon like grasping fingers reaching toward the sky, their blackened stone a stark reminder of dragon fire's fury. Jon Snow felt a shiver as he guided his mount along the Kingsroad. The massive ruin seemed to watch him, as if it recognized something kindred in him. His mismatched eyes narrowed as he studied the distant castle, one hand unconsciously moving to his forearm where yesterday's deep cut had already vanished without a trace.

The sun hung low in the eastern sky, casting long shadows across the rolling countryside. The Northern party moved at a steady pace, Lord Stark at the lead with Robb and Theon flanking him. Jon preferred to ride near the rear, where the quiet afforded him time with his thoughts. Last night's hunt still played in his mind—the way he'd tracked and captured the rabbit with such instinctive ease even in the darkness. The look of surprise on the others' faces.

"Still brooding over your hunting prowess, Snow?"

Jon turned to find Dacey Mormont guiding her chestnut mare alongside his mount. Her dark hair was pulled back in a tight braid, accentuating high cheekbones and the sharp intelligence in her eyes. Unlike most noblewomen, she rode astride rather than sidesaddle, her long legs encased in well-worn leather breeches.

"I wasn't brooding," Jon protested halfheartedly.

"Your face has exactly two expressions," Dacey countered, a smile playing at her lips. "Brooding and slightly less brooding."

Despite himself, Jon felt the corner of his mouth twitch upward. "You've been observing my expressions that closely, have you?"

"Hard not to when they're so rare," she replied. "Like spotting a snow bear in summer."

The easy banter between them had developed over the weeks of travel, a surprising comfort that Jon hadn't anticipated. Dacey treated him differently than most—no pity for his bastard status, no deference to his Stark blood, just straightforward assessment of who he was.

"That rabbit never stood a chance," she continued. "The way you moved—like you could smell it through the underbrush. You'd make a fine hunter in the deeper woods of Bear Island."

"Is that an invitation?" Jon asked before he could stop himself.

Dacey's eyes flashed with something that made his pulse quicken. "Could be. We value skill on Bear Island, not birth circumstances."

A comfortable silence fell between them as their horses picked their way along the road. The massive shadow of Harrenhal loomed larger with each passing mile, its ruined towers somehow both magnificent and grotesque.

"My mother says no man has ever held Harrenhal for long without meeting a bad end," Dacey said, breaking the silence. She leaned closer, pointing toward the tallest of the broken towers. "That's the Kingspyre Tower. They say Aegon's dragonfire melted the stone so it looks like candle wax. They say Harrenhal is cursed. That Harren's screams still echo through the halls on quiet nights."

Jon was grateful for the shift. "They say many things."

"And they say you killed a bear the size of a castle," Dacey replied with a knowing look. "People say many things, Snow."

"The bear wasn't that large," Jon said carefully.

"And Harrenhal might not be cursed," Dacey returned with a shrug. "But I'd still watch my step inside those walls if I were you."

Before he could respond, a shout came from the front of the column. Lord Stark was calling for them to increase pace if they wanted to make camp before nightfall.

"Race you to that elm?" Dacey challenged suddenly, nodding toward a tree in the distance.

Without waiting for his response, she dug her heels into her mount's flanks and shot forward. Jon hesitated only a moment before following, the wind in his face temporarily blowing away the weight of secrets and memories.

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The midday sun beat down mercilessly as the Northern party stopped to rest on a grassy hillside overlooking Harrenhal. From this vantage point, the full scope of the massive castle was apparent—five enormous towers reaching skyward like twisted, blackened fingers, surrounded by a curtain wall so thick it seemed impenetrable. Even in ruin, it was easily the largest structure Jon had ever seen, dwarfing even Winterfell by comparison.

Jon led his mount to a small stream where several of the Northern heirs had gathered to water their horses. Smalljon Umber, a giant of a man despite being the youngest son of the Greatjon, was gesturing expansively toward the castle.

"Harren spent forty years building it," Smalljon said, his booming voice carrying easily. "Forty years! Built it to withstand any siege, any army. And Aegon the Conqueror burned him alive inside it anyway. What's the bloody point of stone walls against dragonfire?"

Domeric Bolton stood slightly apart from the others, his pale eyes studying the ancient fortress. Unlike his house's reputation, Domeric had shown himself to be quiet and scholarly during their journey, though something in his gaze always left Jon uneasy.

"Harren's folly wasn't in building strong walls," Domeric said softly, running a hand through his dark hair. "It was in refusing to kneel. Pride is deadlier than any dragon."

"Spoken like a true Bolton," Dacey remarked dryly, approaching with her waterskin. "Always practical about submission."

Domeric's thin lips curved in what might have been a smile. "And Mormonts are practical about survival, are they not? Your aunt bent the knee to Aegon instead of burning. Wise woman."

"What do you think, Snow?" Smalljon asked Jon. "Could Harrenhal withstand a siege from the North?"

Jon considered the question. "Depends who's defending it. Walls don't hold castles—men do."

"Well said," Smalljon laughed, slapping Jon on the back hard enough to stagger most men. Jon barely shifted his stance. "Speaking of strength, see that boulder there?" He pointed to a rounded stone nearly as tall as Jon's waist. "Bet you can't lift it."

The impromptu contest quickly drew attention. Smalljon went first, straining and reddening as he managed to hoist the massive stone a few inches off the ground before dropping it with a thud.

"Your turn, Bolton," he wheezed.

Domeric shook his head. "I prefer battles of wit to brawn."

"Snow then," Smalljon grinned. "Show us if the Bastard Wolf has the strength to match his reputation."

Jon hesitated. He'd been careful since White Harbor not to display his full abilities, knowing they weren't natural. But refusing would seem strange. He approached the boulder cautiously, mentally calculating how much effort would seem reasonable without raising suspicion.

Gripping the stone, he began to lift, deliberately letting his arms shake with exertion. But as he raised it, something in him—the part that always seemed to hunger for more—pushed harder than he intended. The boulder rose smoothly to his waist, then chest level, with far less strain than should have been possible.

Realizing his mistake, Jon quickly let the stone drop, feigning exhaustion. But he'd seen the looks—Smalljon's impressed whistle, Domeric's narrowed eyes, Dacey's raised eyebrow.

"Seven hells, Snow," Smalljon exclaimed. "No wonder you killed that bear!"

Domeric stepped closer, his pale eyes looking at Jon as if he were an interesting animal. "Curious how strength comes so naturally to some," he said quietly. "Almost... inhuman, wouldn't you say?"

The word sent a jolt through Jon. Did Bolton suspect something? Before he could respond, Dacey stepped between them.

"Speaking of strength," she interrupted smoothly, "care to test yours against mine, Snow? Strength's nothing without speed to match."

Jon shot her a grateful look. "If you're offering to get knocked into the dirt, who am I to refuse?" This earned a burst of laughter from Smalljon.

They moved to a flat stretch of grass while a small crowd of curious Northerners gathered to watch. Dacey unsheathed her blunted practice sword.

"Ten coppers on the Mormont girl," called out Torrhen Karstark, leaning on his spear.

"That's no girl, that's a she-bear," his brother Eddard replied with a laugh. "And I'll take that wager. Snow moves like a shadowcat when he wants to."

Jon rolled his shoulders, feeling the familiar weight of the practice sword in his hand. Across from him, Dacey moved with confidence, her stance wide and balanced, practice blade held at an angle across her body.

"Ready when you are, Snow," she said, a challenging smile playing at her lips.

Jon nodded and began circling to his right. Dacey mirrored him perfectly, maintaining the distance between them. He feinted with a quick step forward, but she didn't bite, merely adjusting her footwork easily.

"One of you actually strike, or we'll be here till winter comes again!" shouted Smalljon, drawing laughter from the crowd.

Taking the initiative, Jon launched an attack—a probing thrust followed by a horizontal slash. Dacey parried both with economical movements, the wooden blades making a satisfying *clack* as they connected. She riposted immediately, her counterattack flowing from her defense so smoothly it seemed a single motion.

Jon stepped back, blocking her high cut and deflecting a follow-up aimed at his ribs. Their blades locked momentarily, bringing them face to face. Up close, Jon noticed a slight scar above her right eyebrow, barely visible against her skin.

"That the best you've got?" Dacey taunted, pushing against the blade lock.

Jon disengaged with a twist of his wrists and spun away, narrowly avoiding her sweeping cut. "Just warming up," he replied.

The crowd hooted appreciatively as they exchanged another flurry of blows, the tempo increasing.

Jon adjusted his strategy, noting how Dacey never remained stationary. She fought like flowing water, constantly shifting position, making herself a difficult target. When he committed to a powerful downward strike, she sidestepped rather than meeting it directly, letting his momentum carry his blade harmlessly past while countering with a quick rap to his shoulder.

"Point to the she-bear!" someone called out.

"First blood to Mormont!" another voice added.

Jon felt his competitive instincts surge. He feinted high, then dropped low when she moved to parry, sweeping his practice blade against her calf with controlled force.

"And Snow evens the score!" Smalljon bellowed.

Dacey grinned, seemingly enjoying herself now. "Not bad," she acknowledged. "But Bear Islanders learn to fight before we learn to walk."

She launched into a complex attack sequence—high, middle, low—forcing Jon to backpedal across the grass. Her strikes came faster now, each one flowing into the next. Jon parried and blocked, his forearms absorbing the vibrations of each impact. She was stronger than she looked, each blow carrying surprising weight behind it.

"Seven hells, the she-bear's got him on the run!" Torrhen Karstark exclaimed.

"Don't count Snow out yet," Robb's voice cut through the crowd. "He's never lost a spar to me when he's truly trying."

Jon caught Robb's eye briefly before refocusing on Dacey. His brother's comment stung slightly—Robb knew Jon always held back during their training sessions, careful never to outshine the heir to Winterfell. But they didn't know just how much he was holding back.

Deciding to show a little more of his skill, Jon stopped retreating and planted his front foot firmly. As Dacey's next strike came, he caught it at an angle that deflected its force, then countered with a blindingly fast combination—a thrust toward her sword arm followed by a pivot that brought his blade arcing toward her opposite shoulder.

Dacey barely managed to dodge, her eyes widening slightly at his sudden increase in speed. "There he is," she murmured, just loud enough for Jon to hear. "I wondered when you'd stop playing."

"The Bastard Wolf bares his teeth!" called out Daryn Hornwood. "Ten stags says Snow puts her down within the next minute!"

"I'll take that action," Lady Maege replied immediately. "My Dacey hasn't shown her best yet either."

As if spurred by her mother's confidence, Dacey attacked with renewed vigor. She abandoned the measured exchanges for a more aggressive approach, using subtle feints and misdirection. One moment she appeared to be targeting Jon's left side, the next her blade was whistling toward his right.

Jon parried by instinct more than sight, their wooden swords moving so quickly they became blurs in the sunlight. The crowd had fallen relatively quiet now, captivated by the display of skill.

Jon saw his opening when Dacey overextended slightly on a lunge. He sidestepped and countered, expecting to land a clean hit. Instead, Dacey dropped lower than should have been possible, his practice sword whistling harmlessly over her head. Before he could recover, she hooked her blade around his ankle while simultaneously pushing against his chest with her free hand.

"Seven hells!" Jon gasped as he felt himself falling backward.

In a last instinctive move, he grabbed Dacey's leather jerkin, pulling her with him as he fell. They tumbled together, Jon's back hitting the grass with a thud, Dacey landing squarely on top of him. Their practice swords clattered away as they grappled briefly for dominance.

"Get him, Dacey!"

"I've seen better wrestling from tavern drunks!" someone else called out.

Jon managed to roll, momentarily gaining the upper position, but Dacey hooked her leg around his and executed a smooth reversal that left them face to face, her body pinning his to the ground. Their faces were inches apart, both breathing hard from exertion. Jon could smell pine and leather on her skin, could see a bead of sweat tracing down her temple.

In that instant, Wylla's face flashed in Jon's mind—her seafoam hair spread across the pillow, her eyes looking up at him with an expression so similar to what he now saw in Dacey's. Guilt and grief surged through him.

With a sudden burst of strength that surprised even him, Jon twisted and rolled away, breaking Dacey's hold and rising to his feet.

"Quick as a bloody shadowcat!" Eddard Karstark exclaimed.

Dacey remained on one knee for a moment, looking at Jon strangely. Then she rose, grass from her leathers.

"I think we can call that a draw," she announced to the disappointed crowd.

"A draw?" protested Smalljon. "You had him pinned!"

"And he broke the pin," she countered smoothly. "In real combat, we'd both have more cuts than a butcher's block by now." She extended her hand to Jon. "Well fought, Snow."

The crowd began to disperse, some exchanging coins over won and lost bets, others returning to their duties. Jon retrieved their practice blades.

"You know," Dacey said quietly as he handed her sword back, "whoever she was, I don't think she'd want you to stop living."

Jon glared at her, making her flinch. "What are you talking about?"

"The ghost in your eyes when we were close. I recognize grief when I see it, Snow." She sheathed her practice blade. "Just something to consider."

With that, she walked away, leaving Jon standing alone with his thoughts as the shadow of Harrenhal stretched longer across the hillside.

Night

Twilight deepened into night as the Northern party made camp in the shadow of Harrenhal. Despite being a day's ride past the massive fortress, its presence seemed to linger like a bad dream. The men had erected tents in a wide circle, with Lord Stark's pavilion at the center and smaller tents radiating outward by rank and relation. A large bonfire roared in the middle of the camp, around which many of the Northerners now gathered, seeking warmth.

Jon sat between Robb and Arya, the firelight dancing across his features as he stared into the flames. The day's ride had been long, but it wasn't physical fatigue that weighed on him. The sparring match with Dacey had left him unsettled.

"Jon," Arya nudged him suddenly. "Tell them about the bear."

Jon felt his chest tighten. "Not much to tell that hasn't been told already."

"But you never tell it," Arya insisted. "Everyone else does, and they weren't even there."

Several faces turned expectantly toward Jon. Even Lord Stark, usually reserved in such gatherings, seemed curious to hear Jon's version of events.

"It wasn't as grand as people make it sound," Jon began reluctantly and told them what had happened that night, how the bear had appeared out of nowhere during their journey towards White Harbor.

"How big was it really?" asked Smalljon Umber. "Some say it was big as a mammoth."

Jon forced a smile. "Large for a bear. Not quite a mammoth."

"And you killed it!"

"The bear had already mauled five men before I took it down."

"Still," Lady Maege said appraisingly. "Taking down a full-grown bear single-handed is no small feat. You'd make a fine husband for a Bear Island woman with that kind of spirit." She glanced meaningfully at her daughter.

Dacey rolled her eyes. "Mother, please."

Laughter rippled around the fire, and Jon felt his cheeks burning. Thankfully, the conversation soon turned to the upcoming tournament in King's Landing, with various Northerners boasting about their chances in the melee or joust.

As the night wore on, the gathering began to break up. Some retired to their tents while others drifted toward smaller fires where games and quieter conversations continued. Jon found himself sitting alone, still staring into the dying fire, when a shadow fell across him.

"You look like you could use something stronger than thoughts," Dacey said, offering him a skin of what smelled distinctly more potent than ale.

Jon accepted it with a nod of thanks. "What is this?"

"Bear Island mead," she replied, settling beside him. "Made with honey from bees that feed on winterberries. It bites back if you're not careful."

Jon took a cautious sip, the liquid burning pleasantly down his throat before blooming into unexpected sweetness. "It's good," he admitted, passing it back.

"Keep it," she said. "I have another." She pulled a second skin from her belt. "A warrior should celebrate properly after a good match."

They drank in companionable silence for a moment, watching the last of the revelers disperse to their tents.

"You don't like talking about White Harbor."

It wasn't a question. Jon took a long drink before answering.

"No."

Dacey nodded, staring into the dying cookfire. "When I was fifteen, I killed my first man," she said matter-of-factly. "Ironborn raider. He'd wounded my cousin during a raid on our shores."

Jon turned to look at her profile, sharp against the firelight.

"Everyone at Bear Island treated me like some kind of hero," she continued. "Made toasts to my name. But all I could think about was the sound he made when my axe hit his chest. The way

his eyes looked when the light went out of them." She took a drink from her own horn. "It's a strange thing, being celebrated for something that haunts you."

The understanding in her voice loosened something in Jon's chest.

"It wasn't just the bear," he admitted quietly, the closest he'd come to speaking the truth to anyone besides Benjen. "There was... something else happened at White Harbor. Someone I couldn't protect."

Dacey turned to face him, her eyes catching the last light of the fire. "Wylla Manderly."

Jon's surprise must have shown on his face.

"People talk," she explained with a small shrug. "Not about the details, just that there was a girl, and that you returned different."

Jon stared into his ale. "She died because of me."

"Because of wildlings," Dacey corrected gently. "Unless you held the blade yourself?"

"I should have been faster. Stronger." The words felt bitter on his tongue.

Dacey's hand found his forearm, her touch firm and warm. "The dead don't want us to stop living, Snow. Trust me, I know something about that."

Jon looked up, meeting her eyes. "Do you?"

"My father," she said simply. "Fell to a Lannister sword at Pyke. For years, I thought honoring him meant carrying his grief. It took me time to realize that wasn't what he would have wanted."

The silence between them felt different now—charged with something Jon couldn't quite name.

"The air grows cold," Dacey observed, her voice lower. She shifted slightly closer, the warmth of her leg pressing against his. "We northerners should keep each other warm, don't you think?"

The invitation in her tone was unmistakable. Jon felt a flush that had nothing to do with the dying fire. Part of him wanted to lean into that warmth, to let someone else's presence drive away the ghosts that haunted him.

But Wylla's face flashed in his mind.

"I should rest," he said finally. "Long ride tomorrow."

Dacey studied him for a moment before nodding, neither offended nor deterred. "Another time, perhaps." She stood, but her hand lingered briefly on his shoulder. "Good night, Jon Snow."

As she walked away, Jon remained by the fading embers, wondering if the warmth he felt at her touch was a betrayal of Wylla's memory.

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Jon found himself walking through ruins that resembled Harrenhal, yet everything was distorted in the way only dreams could manage. The massive towers seemed to stretch impossibly high, their blackened stones shifting and rearranging when he wasn't looking directly at them. The sky above was neither day nor night but something between—a purplish twilight streaked with luminous bands of blue and gold.

His footsteps echoed strangely as he crossed what should have been the courtyard but was instead a vast expanse of what looked like sand, fine-grained and pale as bone. Each step left no footprint, as though the ground absorbed all evidence of his passage.

"You are here again."

The voice came from everywhere and nowhere at once. Jon turned to find Ymir standing before him, materializing as if she'd been there all along. She appeared as she always did in his dreams—hauntingly beautiful, with features that somehow seemed both youthful and ancient simultaneously. Her silver dress clung to her form, the fabric shimmering like liquid metal in the strange light, accentuating full breasts and the curve of her hips. Her hair, the color of pale wheat, hung loose around her shoulders, moving slightly in a breeze Jon couldn't feel.

"Where is this place?" Jon asked, his voice sounding hollow in the vast dreamscape.

"A crossing point," Ymir replied, moving toward him with ethereal grace. "Where your world and mine touch." Her eyes, ancient and knowing, studied his face. "The walls between worlds grow thin, Jon Snow. Especially here, where blood and fire once merged so violently."

She gestured around them, and the ruins of Harrenhal seemed to flicker, momentarily replaced by a different landscape—a walled city of impossible size, with structures that dwarfed even the massive castle.

"I don't understand," Jon said, frustrated. "These dreams—what do they mean? What am I?"

Ymir's expression softened slightly. "You ask direct questions, expecting direct answers. But some truths can only be understood through experience, not explanation." She took his hand, her touch sending a strange tingling sensation up his arm. "Come. There is something you must see."

The landscape shifted around them. They stood now on what appeared to be a massive wall, looking down at a battlefield. Jon gasped as he beheld monstrous figures clashing below—enormous humanoid creatures, their muscular bodies devoid of skin, exposing raw

sinew and tissue. Some stood as tall as Harrenhal's towers. They fought with brutal efficiency, tearing each other apart only to regenerate and continue fighting.

"Titans," Ymir said simply. "The power you carry within you."

Jon watched in horror and fascination as one Titan seized another, ripping its arms clean off before biting into its nape. Steam rose from the wounds, obscuring the battlefield momentarily.

"This was my world," Ymir continued. "A place of endless conflict, where those with the power of the Titans fought for dominance."

"But how did I—" Jon began.

"The power crossed between worlds," Ymir interrupted. "Just as it has done again."

Jon turned to her sharply. "What do you mean, 'again'?"

Ymir's eyes met his, unflinching. "You are no longer alone." She pointed to the horizon of the battlefield, where a slender figure stood watching from atop a distant ridge. Too far to see clearly.

"Who is that?" Jon demanded, his heart racing.

"Another who should not exist," Ymir replied cryptically. "Another who carries power not meant for your world."

"Stop speaking in riddles!" Jon's frustration boiled over. "Tell me plainly—what am I? What is this power inside me? How do I control it?"

"You are the convergence of two bloodlines that should never have met," Ymir said, her voice softening. "Valyrian fire and Eldian might, joined across worlds through paths only I can see."

"Valyrian? You mean like the Targaryens?" Jon shook his head in confusion. "That's impossible. I'm Ned Stark's bastard."

Jon reached out desperately, trying to grasp Ymir's arm.

"Wait! You said I'm not alone anymore—does that mean there are others like me in Westeros? Is that what you're warning me about?"

Ymir's form was already becoming transparent, fading into the mist. "The paths connect all Eldians, Jon Snow. Through time and space, across worlds. I feel them awakening in your world. One is closer than you think, moving toward you even now."

"In King's Landing?" Jon pressed. "Is that where I'll find answers?"

"You carry the Attack Titan within you," Ymir's voice was growing distant.

The dreamscape collapsed around him, Harrenhal's twisted towers crumbling into nothingness. The last thing Jon saw before waking was a pair of purple eyes watching him from the darkness, hauntingly familiar yet utterly strange.

He jolted awake in his tent, his body covered in sweat, steam rising faintly from his skin in the cool night air. The dream clung to him more vividly than any before, Ymir's warning echoing in his mind.

You are no longer alone.