The Godswood of King's Landing was nothing like Winterfell's.

Jon noticed it the moment they stepped through the low iron gate: there was no heart tree. No ancient weirwood with its bone-white bark and blood-red leaves watching over the grounds with carved eyes. In its place stood an oak, old and thick and covered in moss, but it was just a tree. Just wood and leaves with no face, no memory, no gods living inside its roots.

King Baelor cut the weirwood down, Jon remembered reading from the books. A pious fool who thought the old gods had no place in a city of the Seven. He'd butchered the tree the same way he'd tried to butcher everything that didn't fit neatly into his prayers.

But Jon didn't care about dead kings or missing trees tonight. Not when the truth was standing right in front of him, wrapped in his father's silence.

Jon could feel the cold against his skin; it wasn't the same cold as the one in Winterfell. Jon leaned heavily on his crutches, his chest screamed in pain as he walked; it felt like his ribs wanted to escape out of his chest. Ghost padded beside him.

Jaime Lannister walked several paces behind them, giving them space. The Kingslayer moved quietly for once. Without his sword, without his armor, he looked almost ordinary.

Jon stopped walking.

They stood in a small clearing where the oak spread its branches wide overhead. No footsteps. No whispered conversations. No little birds.

Jon turned to his father.

"Father." Jon's voice came out steadier than he felt. "Who was my mother?"

Jon had asked it a hundred times before, a thousand times, in a hundred different ways. And every time, the answer had been the same: silence, deflection, *later*. Always later. Later when you're older. Later when we're home. Later when the time is right.

But there was no later left.

Ned took a deep breath, and his grey eyes looked back at Jon's purple ones.

"I am not your father, Jon."

Five words.

Jon's eyes widened. His grip tightened on the crutches until his knuckles went white. He was aware, distantly, of Jaime standing a few paces away, watching, saying nothing.

A cold spread across Jon's chest; it felt like it was swallowing his heart.

"That means..." Jon's voice cracked. He swallowed hard. "I am..."

Ned nodded slowly, and he seemed like he didn't want to say it. "You are my blood," Ned said quietly. "But not my son."

"You are the son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark."

The world turned.

The ground beneath Jon's feet was moving around, and something hot and sour rose in his throat. He felt sick. Genuinely, physically sick, as if someone had reached inside his chest and twisted everything they found there.

Rhaegar Targaryen.

The name echoed through his mind like a bell struck in an empty tower. Rhaegar, who stole Lyanna Stark from her family. Rhaegar, who started a war that killed thousands. Rhaegar, the rapist. The monster. The dragon who took the wolf-girl and used her and left her to die in a tower in Dorne while the kingdom burned.

Jon's legs buckled.

Ghost was there in an instant, pressing his massive body against Jon's side, holding him upright. Jon grabbed fistfuls of white fur and held on, his breath coming in short, ragged gasps. And somewhere far below, deep beneath the Red Keep, in the dark cellar where the dragon skulls kept their silent vigil, he felt RedHeart. She felt his distress. She was calling to him.

Jon wished she was here. Wished he could feel her heat against his skin.

Tears burned in his eyes. He blinked them back furiously.

Worse than a bastard. I'm a child of rape.

"Jon." Ned's voice cut through the spinning. Hands gripped Jon's shoulders, and the ground stopped moving, and Jon looked up into grey eyes that were bright with unshed tears. "Listen to me. You are not a child of rape."

Jon swallowed. His throat felt like it was lined with broken glass. "What do you mean?" he managed. "Everyone knows the story. Everyone knows what Rhaegar did to her."

"Everyone knows a lie." Ned shook his head slowly. "I don't know all the details. I wish I did. But I know this much: Lyanna and Rhaegar were in love." His voice faltered on the word, as if it cost him something to say it. "They loved one another, Jon. Whatever else happened, whatever mistakes were made, that much was true."

Jon stared at him. The words didn't make sense. They couldn't make sense. The entire rebellion, his grandfather's death, his uncle Brandon's death, the thousands who died on

battlefields from the Trident to the Reach, all of it built on one simple truth: Rhaegar Targaryen kidnapped and raped Lyanna Stark.

And now...his uncle was telling him that truth was a lie.

"I believe him."

Both Jon and Ned turned. Jaime had stepped closer.

"I don't know what happened between Prince Rhaegar and Lady Lyanna," Jaime said, looking at Jon. "But I knew Prince Rhaegar. I served him." He paused as if remembering something painful. "He was a good prince. The best man I ever served under. I cannot imagine him forcing himself on a girl. It wasn't in him."

Jon looked between the two men who couldn't be more different, the honorable lord and the oath-breaking knight, and saw the same thing in both their faces: certainty.

Ned's hand was still on Jon's shoulder. "Lyanna and Rhaegar met during the Tourney at Harrenhal," he said. "That's when it began between them. I didn't know. None of us did." A shadow crossed his face. "The first sign was when Rhaegar rode past his own wife, Elia Martell, and crowned Lyanna with a crown of blue winter roses. Named her the Queen of Love and Beauty."

Jon had heard that story. Everyone had. The day that smiles died.

"Because of that," Ned continued, "when the rumors spread that Rhaegar had taken Lyanna, everyone believed it was abduction. Robert believed it. Your grandfather believed it. Brandon believed it. I believed it. And they acted on that belief, and the realm bled for it." He drew a slow breath. "I learned the truth only at the end. At the Tower of Joy, in the mountains of Dorne. I found her there. Dying."

Jon did not know why, but he felt as if he just lost someone. He always suspected that his mother was dead; his father never talked about her until tonight, but he was sure that he would never see her. In his dreams, she would find him, she would come to him, hug him, calling him her son, and she would not slap him for calling her mother...Jon could finally call someone mother without fear, but now...that could never happened. It was foolishness, he knew, he should have known, yet he couldn't help but feel that he just lost someone very important, very dear to him, even if that someone died fourteen years ago in a tower.

"She'd just given birth." Ned continued. "To you. She was fading, and she knew it. There was blood everywhere. Roses on the bed, dead and dying, just like her." His eyes were distant. "Her last words to me were a plea. She made me swear to protect you. To hide you. Because Robert would kill you if he knew. He would have killed a newborn babe in its cradle if he knew that babe carried Rhaegar's blood."

Jon felt his eyes well up with tears, they burned, and the pain in his chest burned worse than any strike from the mountain, and he felt happy...Happy that his mother had loved him so much, even in her dying moments, she wanted the best for him, she wanted him safe, she spend the last moments of her life making sure he could live...Jon now knew...his mother had loved him until the end.

"Did she name me?" Jon asked, his voice barely a whisper. "Was she the one who chose Jon?"

Ned shook his head. "I named you Jon. After Jon Arryn, who raised me and Robert as his own sons. It was a Northern name. A safe name. One that wouldn't raise questions."

"Then what did she...?"

"Your name," Ned said, and for the first time since coming here, Ned had a fond smile on his face, "the name your mother gave you, is Daemon Targaryen."

Jon heard Jaime inhale sharply behind him. Even the Kingslayer hadn't known that.

Daemon. The woman in his dreams, the one with purple eyes and the silver pendant shaped like a falling star, she had called him that. *Daemon.* She'd known. She'd known before he did. But then he remembered something...Daemon Targaryen, not Daemon Sand or Daemon Snow.

"But Rhaegar was already married," Jon said, his mind catching up, grasping at logic even as the rest of him reeled. "He was married to Elia Martell. That makes me a bastard. A Targaryen bastard, like the Blackfyres."

Ned shook his head again. "Lyanna left a diary. Letters. And proof of her marriage to Rhaegar. He took her as his second wife, the way Aegon the Conqueror took both Visenya and Rhaenys. A Priest of the Seven blessed the union."

Jon felt the last piece fall into place with a sound like thunder.

He was not a bastard.

He had never been a bastard.

Not Jon Snow. Not the stain on Eddard Stark's honor. Not the motherless boy who didn't belong at the high table in Winterfell's Great Hall. He was trueborn. Legitimate. A *Targaryen*.

RedHeart. The fire that didn't burn him. The High Valyrian that came to his tongue like breathing. The dreams of dragons soaring over burning lands. The purple eyes that had marked him since birth.

Daemon Targaryen.

Ghost licked his hand, and the rough warmth of the wolf's tongue pulled Jon back from the edge of whatever abyss he was staring into. He placed his palm flat against Ghost's head.

"The letters," Jon said. "My mother's diary. Where are they?"

"In Winterfell," Ned answered. "Hidden where no one would think to look."

"I want to read them."

"You will."

Jon stood there for a long moment, breathing, just breathing. Then he turned to Jaime.

"How long have you known?"

"A day," Jaime said. "Ser Barristan said something about how you fight. He said you fight like you're singing a sad song with a sword in your hand." A ghost of a smile crossed his face. "That's when I saw it. You don't fight like Arthur Dayne. You fight like your father."

"You need to leave," Jaime said, and the urgency returned to his voice. "As soon as possible. Cersei hired the Mountain to kill you in the melee. You already know that, I suspect. But when Gregor failed..." He paused. "She asked me to finish the task."

The words should have shocked Jon. They didn't. He remembered Cersei's warmth in the dark at Winterfell, her hands on his skin, her lips against his ear. And then her cold fury when he chose the truth over her lies. The same woman who had gasped his name in the night now wanted him dead because her vicious son wanted to hurt Arya.

"Why?" Ned's voice was sharp. "Why are you going against your own family, Kingslayer?"

Jaime was quiet for a moment. "I have my reasons. But I'll tell you this much, Lord Stark. The Mountain and Amory Lorch killed Elia Martell and her children during the Sack of King's Landing. Elia, who was good and gentle and never harmed anyone. Her daughter Rhaenys, who was three years old. Her son Aegon, who was still a babe at the breast." His voice hardened. "I stood in the throne room with Aerys's blood on my sword and I did nothing to stop it. I will not make that mistake again."

Rhaenys.

The name hit Jon like a fist. He thought of the girl with purple eyes, the one who had crept into his chamber and called him *valonqar*. Little brother. She had held RedHeart and the dragon had accepted her touch. She had called herself his sister.

But Jaime just said Rhaenys was dead. Killed at three years old. So who was the girl?

Jon's head was pounding.

"We leave within two days," Ned said it like an order. "We pack what we need and take a ship from King's Landing. Back to Winterfell. Back to where we belong."

Where we belong.

Jon thought of Winterfell's crypts. The cold stone kings staring down at him with their stone eyes and their iron swords across their laps. He'd felt it every time he walked among them, that whisper in the dark: *You do not belong here.* He'd thought it was because he was a bastard, unwelcome among the honored dead.

Now he knew why. Because he was no Stark. He was a Targaryen.

If he didn't belong in the North, where did he belong?

"I'm your ally, Prince Daemon." Jaime's voice broke through his thoughts. "And your loyal guard, if you'll have me. I wasn't there to protect your father at the Trident. I can't change that. But I can protect the son."

Jon looked at the Kingslayer for a long time. The man who killed kings offering to guard the son of the prince he'd failed. There was something almost poetic about it. Almost cruel.

"Thank you," Jon said. The words felt inadequate, but they were all he had. "I need time. To think. To understand what all of this means."

Ned nodded. "Let's get you back to bed."

The walk back felt longer than the walk out. Every step sent pain lancing through Jon's body, but the physical agony was nothing compared to the storm raging inside his skull. *Daemon Targaryen. Son of Rhaegar and Lyanna. Trueborn. Not a bastard. Never a bastard.*

Jaime parted from them at the entrance to the Tower of the Hand, heading toward the Kingsguard chambers. He said nothing as he left, just gave Jon one long look and a nod. Then the darkness swallowed him.

Ned walked Jon to his chamber, helped him settle onto the bed, and stood over him for a moment. His face was drawn and exhausted, but he seemed relieved.

"Everything I did," Ned said quietly, "I did to keep you alive. I need you to know that."

Jon nodded.

Ned left, closing the door softly behind him.

Jon sat on the edge of his bed in the silence, Ghost lying at his feet, red eyes watching him with quiet devotion. The chamber felt enormous and empty. No dragon heat on his shoulder. No purring vibration against his chest. Just stone and shadows and the weight of a name he'd never known was his.

Daemon Targaryen.

He wished RedHeart was here. Wished he could feel her warmth. But she was deep below the castle, curled in the eye socket of Balerion the Black Dread, alone in the dark.

Jon wasn't sure what he was supposed to do now. He wasn't sure who he was supposed to be. Jon Snow had been a bastard with no mother, no name, no future beyond the Wall. Daemon Targaryen was the trueborn son of a dead prince, heir to a dynasty of dragonlords, with enemies who wanted him dead before he could draw another breath.

Both felt like strangers.

Then he remembered: the second egg. The one that hadn't hatched. It was still here, hidden in the chest beneath his bed. He might not have RedHeart beside him tonight, but at least he had that. He had found the two eggs in Lyanna's tomb, and only now he remembered that he had not asked his uncle how the eggs came to be there; he hadn't thought about it. He decided to ask tomorrow, when there was no Jaime Lannister to hear about the eggs and the dragon.

Jon leaned down carefully, ignoring the pain, and reached beneath the bed. His fingers found the chest, and he dragged it out across the stone floor. The wool-lined box felt lighter than he remembered.

He opened the lid.

The chest was empty.

Jon stared at the bare wool lining. His hands trembled. He ran his fingers across the fabric, pressing into the corners, as if the egg might somehow be hiding in a fold. But there was nothing. Just wool and wood and empty air where a dragon egg should have been.

Gone.

The egg was gone

(Image Below)


I AM
NOT
YOUR
FATHER.

.