

“Yes, yes, yes!” Ros screamed at the top of her lungs, leaning down and biting the pillow in front of her as a raw, guttural squeal was forced from her throat.

She’d had a lot of men in her day, having been born to a whore and grown up in a whorehouse. She’d barely had her first moonblood before her maidenhead was sold for a silver moon, a fair price even for a beauty like her in the North, and in the fifteen years since, she’d experienced every form of debauchery there was as she plied her trade. That didn’t mean that she couldn’t still be surprised, and a couple years ago she’d had the surprise of a lifetime when she took her favorite customer for the first time.

It wasn’t that he was handsome, though he was easily the most beautiful man she’d ever seen, or that he was hung like a prize bull, though gods, she swore she could feel him in her stomach. It was that he seemed to instinctively understand what she enjoyed and what she didn’t, and absolutely reveled in driving her to greater heights of pleasure than any other man could even dream of. The feeling of him filling her up again and again as he fucked her from behind with long, hard strokes was nothing short of mind-melting, and the way his large, heavy, very full balls struck her clit every time he bottomed out inside her was enough to make her see stars.

When her orgasm came, she shrieked at the top of her lungs, drowning in ecstasy the likes of which she’d never thought herself capable of, and as she heard him grunt and fill her up with yet another load of his thick, undoubtedly potent seed, her eyes rolled back and she collapsed on her belly, spent and utterly exhausted.

“Please, milord, mercy,” Myra whimpered next to them, lying on her back and still shaking from the last time he’d taken her. She brushed her long blonde hair out of her face and shivered as she saw him pull his cock from Ros’ well-fucked cunt, unleashing a torrent of thick seed that spilled out through her forest of red curls. “I can’t feel my cunt.”

“I can’t feel my legs,” Anara sighed, smiling up at Jon. “You’re a wonder, you are.”

“Don’t worry,” the young man chuckled, rolling onto his back and beckoning them to move closer. “I’ve had my fill.”

“Your fill,” Ros laughed, still panting for breath. “Your fill...is not like...other men’s.”

“I’m also no lord, Myra,” Jon chided softly as Anara rested her head on his chest and he started running his fingers through her dark tresses.

“I keep forgetting,” the blonde sighed as she rested her head on his shoulder. “Maybe it’s because you’re allowed to carry a greatsword around everywhere you go.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re not talking about Red Rain?” Jon asked, and she giggled.

“You know what I’m talking about,” Myra grinned, tracing her fingers over his muscular chest as Ros moved in and rested her head on his rock-hard abdomen. “I wish you’d been around when I was your age. It took me six and twenty years to learn I could actually enjoy getting fucked as much as men enjoy fucking me.”

“You don’t enjoy the others at all?” Jon asked.

“I didn’t say that,” Myra murmured. “They just don’t make me scream like you do.”

"No one makes any of us scream like you do," Anara sighed. "I almost regret having to charge you."

"You don't have to," Jon teased, and she slapped his shoulder playfully.

"I might feel like I should be paying you for what you do to me, but a woman's got to eat," Anara replied.

"You could try surviving on his seed," Ros purred, scooping some of his spend out of her gaping quim and bringing her fingers to her lips. "The gods know he gives us enough of it."

"Sadly I don't think it could quite replace your bread," Jon chuckled, having heard enough women over the years react in awe when they saw how much seed he produced to know that it far exceeded what other men did. "You know I pay you all well. Your coin is on the little sacks I left on the table there along with your moon tea. You can count it out as you drink it."

"Still insist on watching us do it?" Myra asked, and he sighed.

"You know how I feel about making bastards," Jon said, and they nodded, each of them having heard him go on about it before.

It was a shame in truth, as they'd have all happily had his babes if he let them, but he made it clear to any woman he bedded that he was to watch them drink the moon tea he always brought with him afterward, and they invariably agreed.

"So responsible," Ros purred. "If other men were like you, there wouldn't be any bastards in Westeros."

"What a world that would be," Jon rumbled, and they looked at him tenderly.

They were his favorite whores, they knew, women that he bedded regularly, either alone or, often enough, together, and given how much younger he was than them, it was hard for them not to want to mother him a little, especially since no one else ever had.

"I think I speak for all of us when I say that the world would be worse with you in it," Anara whispered, brushing his long brown hair out of his face and tracing a finger softly over a faded scar on his right cheek.

"You're sweet," Jon smiled.

"She's right," Ros murmured, sitting up and stretching her arms over her head. His eyes immediately darted to her heavy breasts, and she smirked, saying, "After all, where would Winterfell be without the child hero who saved its heir?"

Jon rolled his eyes at that, and the other two sat up as well, each one wrapping an arm around Ros' waist. Despite everything he'd just done, he felt his cock twitch at the sight of the three of them, and all three of them winced at the sight.

"Relax," he chuckled. "I really am done for the day."

"The fact that you can still harden at all after everything you just did to the three of us is utterly mad," Myra sighed, shaking her head, and he grinned, sitting up and leaning back against the headboard of the bed they'd thoroughly soiled.

"Seeing you three together like this?" Jon asked. "I think I'd still harden if I were dead."

They preened under his praise, and he took another moment to openly admire them. There was a reason that they were his favorites. Though they each had a different hair color, they had quite a bit in common, similarly full figures with heavy breasts, wide hips, and plump arses he could dig his fingers into as he fucked them. Even their faces were relatively similar, with full lips, delicate noses, and light eyes, each a different shade of blue. He knew what he liked; that he couldn't deny, and as he'd started seeking out the company of women years ago, he'd learned that well and early.

"You like them because they remind you of her," a voice in the back of his head said, and his face fell immediately.

"What's wrong?" Anara asked.

"Nothing," Jon lied, shaking his head. "I just remembered that my father wanted to speak to me and if I don't get going soon, I'll be late."

"Well, we wouldn't want you to keep his lordship waiting on our account," Ros sighed, getting out of bed and standing up on shaky legs. "You girls good to walk yet?"

"I'm going to look like I took on every stallion in the Winterfell stables for at least another hour, but aye," Myra replied, and Jon snorted.

"Please tell me no one has ever actually tried that," he winced, and the three of them giggled.

"We have heard tales of slave girls in Essos being made to mate with animals for the amusement of men, but no one here ever has," Anara replied. "Having seen a horse's cock before, I can't imagine anyone would survive the experience."

"You're the closest thing to a horse we could handle, luv," Ros grinned, picking up her pouch and pulling out the vial of moon tea.

She knocked it back without hesitation, watching as the other two did the same, and set the vial down, recorking it and pouring the coins into her hand.

"Feel free to count," Jon murmured, standing up and going over to the nearby basin so he could wash up as best he could.

"I trust you," Alana shrugged, putting the coins in her own purse and slipping the vial back into the pouch before tossing it onto the bed.

"We all do," Myra murmured, doing the same.

"And unlike most of the men we get in here, we know you can count," Ros snarked, making him laugh.

He finished washing up, feeling content with what he'd done when he no longer smelled quite so much like cunt, and quickly got dressed.

“Come back any time,” Ros purred.

“Though, if you could give us a day, I would like to be able to feel my legs again for a little bit,” Myra quipped, and he smiled.

He said his goodbyes and left, making his way through the crowded brothel and trying to slip out without comment.

“I hope you left those three more able to work than you did last time,” Alys, the aged proprietor of the place called out and Jon froze. “They swear you don’t hurt them but I’ve never seen my girls more worn out than they are after you see them.”

“That’s why I pay as well as I do,” Jon murmured. “I need to go, Alys.”

“Right, right,” Alys nodded. “See you soon.”

Jon sighed at that, knowing it was true. As a boy, when he’d first learned just how babes were made, he’d sworn to himself that he would never take a woman to bed, never risk making another bastard go through life wondering why the world blamed them for something they didn’t do. That vow had lasted approximately one week into him noticing just how beautiful women really were and how they affected him. It was weak of him, he knew, uncharacteristically weak, but he couldn’t help it.

“I’m worse than fucking Theon when it comes to women,” he thought to himself with a scowl as he made his way through Wintertown.

Thinking of the Ironborn man worsened his mood, as it always did. It had been many years since that terrible night in the crypts, and yet he still dreamed of it often. Having their exhilaration at exploring somewhere that they knew they shouldn’t be turn to terror at the realization that they weren’t the only ones down there was the single scariest moment of either of their lives, save for the one that followed as Jon stepped forward and claimed to be Robb.

That incident had led directly to the war against the Ironborn, as their father had immediately written to the king, who called his banners. Their defeat was crushing, with Lord Balon losing all but two of his children and a couple of his brothers in the process, and when he finally knelt to King Robert at the end of it, the terms had been harsh. Both boys had been delighted to hear that the people who terrified them had been punished, though when they learned about just what that punishment would entail, that delight soured quickly.

“How Robb’s come to consider that bragging cunt a friend, I cannot say,” he thought to himself.

Theon had been a sullen thing when he first arrived, but he was smart enough to realize that he needed to make friends and allies among his jailors and had targeted Robb. His brother had resisted, to his credit, still remembering what the older boy’s brother had done to them, but he’d been won over eventually by his charm and persistence.

“At least he’s still wary around him,” Jon sighed, coming to a halt as one of the castle’s guards stopped him.

“Jon,” the man nodded. “Your father bade us tell you to meet him in his solar as quickly as you can.”

“Alright,” Jon nodded, making his way into the courtyard of his home.

He smiled, spotting Bran off near the stables, talking one of the poor stableboys’ ear off, and he would have gone to relieve him if he’d been free, but he knew that he’d spent longer away from the castle than he should have and didn’t dare keep his father waiting any longer. He slipped inside, nodding to the guards standing outside the entrance to the main keep, and quickly went up to the solar, stopping to speak to the guards outside its door.

“I was told to come straight here,” Jon declared.

“Aye, but you’ll need to wait a moment,” Alyn, one of the guards he was fondest of, replied. “Her ladyship is...”

The door opened then, and Lady Catelyn stepped out, coming to a halt as she spotted him. Her bright blue eyes dimmed slightly as she saw him, something they’d always done whenever she gazed at him, and she said, “Jon. Your father’s expecting you.”

“Yes, Lady Catelyn,” Jon nodded, stepping aside to let her leave.

Sacrificing himself to save her son had melted the ice of her gaze a little bit, but she’d never truly be warm to him, and he’d long since accepted that. Putting the thought out of his mind, he stepped inside, seeing his father sitting behind the heavy table that dominated much of his solar, writing a letter.

“Sit,” Ned said without looking up, and Jon barely resisted the urge to wince, wondering what this was about. He sat down, waiting patiently for his father to finish, and when the older man finally looked up, he did wince as he saw how tired his familiar gray eyes looked. “The incident in the training yard yesterday. I’d hear your side of it.”

“With Theon?” Jon asked, confused. “It was nothing. We sparred, and he took the flat of my blade to the face. It’s not like I broke his nose or knocked out a tooth or anything like that, and I wasn’t even trying to hit him under his helmet. I figured he’d block...”

“You and he have quarreled off and on since he got here,” Ned pointed out, “and I know that you exchanged harsh words before your sparring match.”

“You know all too well why we’ve quarreled,” Jon muttered, and his father sighed. “His brother tried to abduct Robb, and I killed him. We were never going to get along.”

“Putting aside old grievances is how we all heal after war,” Ned groaned, and Jon scoffed.

“I’ll accept that when the king invites the last Targaryens over for...” he went to say, only to go silent as Ned slammed his fist down on the table.

“You are not the king, Jon, and Robert doesn’t have to live with them,” he said harshly. “He entrusted me to take Theon in as a hostage, and I did so, and he has lived with us this many years without issue. I understand the reasons behind the animosity between you two, I do, but this has to stop before it worsens. If anything were to happen to him, Balon would have no reason not to unleash more madness on us all, and while we’d defeat him, innocents would die in the process.”

Jon sighed at that, unable to stop himself from saying, “His daughter still lives on Dragonstone.”

"I doubt he'd care, all things considered," Ned sighed. "Theon is his heir, and I doubt even knowing that his daughter is still Lord Stannis' prisoner would stop him from retaliating against us."

"I note you didn't mention if anything were to happen to me," Jon murmured, and Ned looked at him dryly.

"I'm well aware of how things would turn out if you two fought seriously," he replied, a hint of pride in his voice, and Jon sat up straighter at that. "I don't expect the two of you to ever be friends, but, and I will be speaking to him later about this as well, I want this conflict to end. Going forward, you two are not to spar, something I've already made clear to Ser Rodrik; you are not to speak, and frankly, I'd prefer if you didn't look at each other either. Stay out of each other's paths..."

"You know he and Robb get along," Jon pointed out. "What am I to do when my brother is with him?"

"The only time you two seem to be able to coexist without arguing or fighting is when your brother is there, so that can be the exception," Ned replied. His expression softened as he said, "I understand the impact that night had on you, on both of you, but picking fights with Theon Greyjoy won't undo what happened any more than him picking fights with you will bring his brother back."

Jon looked down at that.

"He lost a lot in the war, Jon," Ned said softly. "His brothers, two of his uncles, and his home were all taken from him for something he had no part in. Can you really not sympathize at all with someone who has suffered for something they did not do?"

Jon looked at him in surprise at that. His father never brought up his status as a bastard, much less what it had meant for him over the years. While his situation was better than that of most baseborn, he'd had to endure comments and looks over the years because of what he was and had often enough thought it terribly unfair.

"Even if I could, he'll never forget me for what I did to Maron, even though the cunt was in the wrong," Jon muttered.

"And that is why I want you two to keep your distance," Ned sighed. "Winterfell is a very big place; there's space enough for both of you."

"Understood," Jon nodded. "Was that all?"

"No, it wasn't," Ned said, his face hardening slightly. "Your...dalliance with the old butcher's widow has been brought to my attention."

Jon grimaced at that. "Father, I..."

"Jon, I understand that you're a young man but..." Ned went to say.

"What exactly were you told?" Jon asked, and his father's eyes narrowed.

“That you were seen coming from her home late in the evening three times last week,” Ned replied. “Don’t insult my intelligence by claiming that you were helping her with something. I expect better of you, son.”

“We’re not...it’s not honorable, I know, but we’re not hurting anyone,” Jon insisted. “Her husband died last year, they never had children, and she’s lonely.”

“The mark of a good man is how well he tames his basic urges,” Ned sighed. “It’s difficult, I know, and I’m far from perfect, but some things reflect poorly on us all. Bran and Rickon are still young, but they won’t be forever, and both you and your brother will set examples for them whether you like it or not. I’m also very aware that she’s not the only woman you’re rumored to have...spent time with.”

“I’m sorry, Father,” Jon sighed. “It’s just that...if I go too long without one, I swear I start getting headaches.”

“Headaches?” Ned asked incredulously, only to grow more pensive when he realized that his son wasn’t making that up.

“It’s been going on for years,” Jon admitted. “They’re not too bad, but they’re unceasing when they hit, and when I...seek out a woman, they go away.”

“Have you spoken to Maester Luwin?” Ned asked.

“Bloody awkward conversation that was, but yes, and once I managed to convince him that I wasn’t having him on, he took it seriously and ultimately didn’t find any record of anything like it happening before,” Jon replied. “I otherwise seem to be in perfect health, and whatever it is, it is manageable, but...”

“I can’t believe I don’t think you’re lying,” Ned muttered, pinching his nose, and Jon sighed.

“It’s weird, I know, but...it’s not the only weird thing that has ever happened to me before,” he muttered, and Ned grew more serious.

“These headaches, when did they start?” he asked.

“Around the time I started...well, around the time my body started changing,” Jon replied.

“So they didn’t happen when you were a child?” Ned asked. “They didn’t start after that day?”

“No, it was years later,” Jon replied. “Horrifying as that entire incident was, they only hit me once. They thought I was Robb and...”

“I know, son,” Ned said solemnly. “I hate bringing it up at all, but when the one man struck you, did you hit your head at all? Perhaps on the cave wall?”

“No,” Jon replied. “All he did was cut my cheek. You and the others checked me over when you found me.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever known fear like that,” Ned muttered. “The lot of them dead and you in the middle of it all... I ask this because it might explain the headaches and...you did tell me that a woman...”

"I know what I said," Jon scowled, clenching his eyes shut. He could still see her in his mind's eye if he tried, in more vivid detail than he could see anything he saw back when he was a child, yet he knew she wasn't real, that she couldn't be. "I brought that up with Maester Luwin as well, and he said the same thing that he said back then, that...she was a creation of my terrified mind."

"They did kill each other," Ned murmured, remembering the terrible night, "save for the last one."

"Luwin likely has the right of it," Jon sighed. "They started fighting after one of them hit 'Robb' and it got out of hand because they're Ironborn savages and we'd all be better off if their Drowned God would just swallow those godsforsaken islands into the sea."

"Jon," Ned muttered.

"Father...the woman I saw...or my mind made me think I saw...could that have been my mother?" Jon asked.

"Jon," Ned sighed.

"Not actually, obviously, but my memory of her?" Jon asked.

"No, it couldn't be," Ned sighed. "The woman you described...she didn't look anything like that, and that's all I'm saying about her today."

"I'd just love to know where I got the idea of her," Jon said. "I've never seen a woman like her..."

"And you've seen your share and more," Ned muttered, getting back to the matter at hand. "You swear on your honor that you're not lying to me about the headaches?"

"And on the Stark blood in my veins," Jon replied.

Ned took a long, slow breath before letting it go and leaning back in his chair.

"You know what I think about matters like this," he said slowly. "Acts that dishonor you affect not just you but your family as well, and while I do understand what it is like to be a young man, the best among us are those who manage to temper their basic urges. That said, if you really are suffering some bizarre affliction that this is helping you manage, then...I can look the other way, but I want you to be more discreet going forward. I'm not lying to you about how much the example you and Robb set will matter to Bran and Rickon."

"I'll be more careful, I promise," Jon replied.

"It should go without saying that nothing should come of any of this," Ned said firmly, and he nodded.

"I make sure that...no one that I have bedded has not drunk moon tea in front of me afterward," Jon promised, and Ned grimaced, looking away. "I would not bring bastards into this world, both because I would not bring shame on the family and because I would not sentence an innocent to that."

Ned looked down at that and sighed before saying, "You've grown into a strong and good man, son, that I never doubted. Because I feel that I need to ask, how much are you spending on...moon tea?"

“Nothing that I can’t afford,” Jon assured him. “My tourney winnings are still mostly intact.”

“Lord Wyman was most generous,” Ned murmured.

“Do you think he’ll hold another one any time soon?” Jon asked, and Ned chuckled.

“Unlikely,” he replied. “You know that they’re not common in the North.”

“I know,” Jon sighed. “Was there anything else you wished to discuss?”

“No,” Ned replied. “If you see Robb, do remind him about the feast tonight.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever needed to remind Robb about a feast,” Jon chuckled, “and besides, he knows that Arya would murder him in his sleep if he missed one thrown for her nameday.”

“Your brother always has a lot on his mind around this time of year,” Ned said softly, and Jon nodded.

“Right,” he replied. “It’s been almost ten years.”

“It’s been far more than that since your uncle Brandon and your grandfather were murdered,” Ned replied, and Jon’s eyes went wide. His father almost never mentioned them. “Some things...most memories fade with time, but some...some you need to learn to live with. For your brother and for you, that night’s going to be one of them.”

“I’ll remind him,” Jon said softly. “I’ll see you at the feast.”

Ned smiled at that and watched him leave, fully intending to speak with Luwin himself about these odd headaches his nephew had been experiencing. The maester had clearly deemed it not important enough to mention, but there were things about Jon’s ancestry that he obviously didn’t know, and while Ned couldn’t tell him anything, he could ask a few pointed questions just to be safe.

“It’s been my nameday all day, Jon,” Arya muttered as she followed him around. “Tell me what my gift is already.”

“I will show it to you later,” Jon promised, and she huffed. “You’ll like it, I assure you.”

“If it’s a dress, I’m going to punch you,” Arya said, and he laughed.

“How did you guess?” Jon asked teasingly. “It’s a bright pink gown worthy of a queen...”

He trailed off as she started beating her tiny fists against his back, laughing as they continued on.

“How are you so freakishly strong?” Arya asked. “When I do that to Robb, he feels it.”

“I don’t know if that counts as strength,” Jon murmured, ruffling her hair, “and besides, I know you weren’t trying as hard as you could. It’s not a dress, I promise, and you will love it.”

“There’s Robb,” Arya piped up. “Why’s he staring at the crypts like they killed his favorite raven?”

“Arya, I need to have a word with Robb,” Jon said. “In private.”

“Fine,” Arya replied, her argument dying in her throat as she saw how serious he looked. “Find me afterward, though. You still need to show me that *dance* you mentioned.”

“I remember,” Jon nodded, smiling as he watched her run off. As she turned around a corner and disappeared from sight, his smile fell and he turned back to Robb, quickly joining his brother just outside the entrance to the crypts.

“Nine years,” the redhead said without looking at him.

“Nearly,” Jon murmured. “We never have been able to agree how many days after Arya’s birth it happened.”

“Close enough,” Robb muttered. “Jon...”

“You’d have done it for me,” Jon said, gripping his shoulder, and Robb turned around to hug him.

“I would,” his brother said, “as I know you’d do it all over again if you had to.”

“It all worked out in the end,” Jon sighed as Robb let him go. “They died, we didn’t, and in the end, the Iron Islands were dealt their due for it.”

“If it hadn’t, though,” his brother sighed. “If they’d gotten away with you and discovered that you weren’t me...”

“They didn’t,” Jon said simply. “We won, and while you might hate that you hid down there and didn’t do anything, bearing in mind that you couldn’t have done anything, you telling Father everything probably saved my life too. Yes, the Ironborn were all dead by the time they got there, but if I’d woken up first and tried to get back and gotten lost or if the smell of blood and bodies had attracted wolves or bears...”

“I know that,” Robb sighed, shaking his head. “Deep down, though, especially around this time of year, I just...it’s hard not to remember being that terrified little boy who watched as monsters dragged his brother off, thinking he was him.”

“I know,” Jon sighed. “Luckily we have a very excitable little girl whose nameday it is today to keep us distracted.”

“She does often help,” Robb said, smiling slightly for the first time since he reached the crypts. “I imagine she’s spent all day nagging you to tell her what you got for her.”

“I spent much of the morning training and most of the afternoon...in a place even she wouldn’t follow me,” Jon replied, and Robb rolled his eyes.

“You’re worse than Theon,” he chuckled, and Jon’s face fell immediately. “You know what I mean. Ros again?”

“Yes,” Jon replied. “Father learned about Cara.”

“Oh,” Robb winced. “How did that go?”

“Not as bad as it could have,” Jon replied. “I told him about the headaches.”

“I still say you should ask Maester Luwin to write to the Citadel about that,” Robb said. “It’s not normal.”

“Father might insist that he do so now,” Jon muttered. “I have it under control.”

“If we ever go to war, you needing a woman every few days to avoid pain in your head could become a very serious problem,” Robb pointed out.

“The pain is annoying, but I could still fight through it if I had to,” Jon replied, “and you say that like there aren’t camp followers.”

He grinned at that, and Robb rolled his eyes.

“How angry was he?” the redhead asked.

“About as much as you’d expect, though he did relax a little when I told him I had a genuine excuse,” Jon replied. “So long as I’m more subtle going forward, I should be fine. Have you given more thought to what we discussed before?”

“Father would never allow it,” Robb sighed, shaking his head.

“If we asked together...” Jon went to say.

“I’m his heir,” Robb said, cutting him off. “He’s not going to allow me to go gallivanting off to the other kingdoms.”

“It wouldn’t be gallivanting, it would be...diplomacy,” Jon grinned. “Developing greater ties with the other lords of the great houses. I’d just be there for moral support, really.”

“We’d be seeking out other tourneys to compete in and Father’s smart enough that he’d figure that out quickly,” Robb replied. “We can bring it up if you insist, but I already know what he’d say.”

Jon grumbled at that, and his brother patted his shoulder.

“I should be the one more annoyed about that than you,” Robb reminded him. “You won the damn thing.”

“You could have,” Jon murmured. “To lose out so soon over a damn stone...”

“My pride smarted more than my fucking ankle, but I’m over it,” Robb chuckled. “You showed the men of White Harbor what a son of House Stark can do. I’d be far angrier if neither of us had won.”

“Father did ask me to remind you about the feast,” Jon murmured, and Robb rolled his eyes.

“As if I’d forget it,” he replied. “I know I can be a rather maudlin cunt around this time of year, but I’m not a lackwit. We should probably get inside now. I don’t like the look of those clouds in the distance.”

Jon turned to see what he was talking about and blinked at the mass of dark clouds to the east. The wind, not biting cold as it would become when winter next came, but still cool, picked up just then, blowing his hair back, and he knew that the clouds and storm they represented would likely be on them soon. It had been a relatively calm day up to that point, and he was a little surprised to see it turn so quickly, but it wasn't the first time a storm had hit them suddenly, and it wouldn't be the last. Still, as he and Robb made their way inside, he couldn't shake the odd feeling that the storm wasn't the only thing set to collide with them just then. Shaking his head at the odd thought, he put it out of his mind and focused on the feast they'd soon be enjoying.

"By the gods, you've grown," Benjen grinned, hugging Arya back as she clung to him.

"You came for my nameday?" she asked, sounding so genuinely touched that her older brothers both thought she might actually cry.

"A happy coincidence," Benjen replied, kissing her crown. "Nine already; how time does fly."

"Old Nan says time is like a very fast, very rude dragon," Bran piped up, making his mother chuckle.

"Why rude?" Sansa asked.

"You'll understand that when you're older," Catelyn replied.

"I did write ahead, but I'm guessing that the raven didn't reach you," Benjen said, looking at his brother, who furrowed his brow, looking as serious as ever.

"No, but you are always welcome in this keep and at this table," Ned replied firmly. "Your reason for coming...is it something we should discuss in private?"

"There's little reason to, honestly," Benjen replied as he took the seat his brother gestured to, smiling to one of the servants as she poured him a cup of ale. "The news I come to share will be widespread soon enough."

"What's happened?" Robb asked.

"Have the Wildlings banded together?" Jon asked.

Benjen took a moment to drink his ale and prepare himself for what the Lord Commander had ordered him to tell his brother.

"The wildlings are gone," he replied, and Ned just blinked at him.

"Gone?" he asked. "What do you mean, gone?"

"They are no longer in the lands beyond the Wall," Benjen replied. "Some moons ago a letter arrived at Castle Black that was so absurd we dismissed it out of hand, all but one of us anyway. The person who wrote it claimed that he had arranged for the wildling tribes to be gathered together, marched onto ships, and sailed to Ib."

"That's...that's not possible," Robb replied.

"It shouldn't be, but our maester, whom the letter was addressed to, bade us investigate the claims anyway," Benjen replied. "The other rangers and I have gone looking for them a dozen times in the moons since and found not a single trace of them."

"Could they be in our lands?" Sansa asked, concerned.

"No," Benjen replied, shaking his head. "The kind of numbers we're talking about here, they could never just sneak past the Wall without us knowing."

"You have said before that the Watch was stretched thin," Jon pointed out.

"Yes, but not that thin," Benjen replied. "We're talking about tens of thousands of wildlings here. That sort of force leaves traces, none of which we've found anywhere near the Wall."

"But who in the world would go to these lengths to move them to Ib, and why?" Robb asked.

"And why not tell anyone?" Jon asked.

"The Night's Watch should have informed me sooner," Ned said pointedly, and Benjen sighed.

"I understand that but...we really did think it was nonsense, even after the first few groups of rangers returned without spotting anyone," he replied. "They do tend to try to avoid us, for obvious reasons, and it seemed more likely that they'd pulled back to the Valley of Thenn or somewhere else further away from the Wall. We thought it more likely that we were dealing with another King Beyond the Wall building up his forces than that the letter had been accurate."

"Do you know who wrote it?" Catelyn asked.

"No," Benjen replied. "The seal it came with bore a sigil none of us had seen before and the person who wrote it didn't identify themselves in the text. The only identifying marks of any kind were the two bits of chipped glass that came within it."

"Glass?" Robb asked.

"Some of the others thought they were precious gems at first, though a thief in our ranks quickly pointed out that that wasn't the case," Benjen replied. "One was blue and the other was green; what it was meant to signify, none of us could guess."

For a brief moment Jon was reminded of the woman he'd thought he saw all those years ago and her beautiful mismatched eyes, though he quickly shook his head and put the thought out of his mind.

"Why did your maester believe it?" he asked.

"He said that a claim that outrageous was worth investigating even if it seemed unlikely," Benjen replied.

"It was addressed to him, though, and he took it seriously," Jon pressed. "Could it be someone he knows?"

“Our maester is so old that everyone he knew before he joined us and their children are likely all dead,” Benjen replied. “The letter was addressed to him by his title, not his name.”

“This is...something we can discuss further later,” Ned said, still processing the bizarre turn of events. “This feast is for Arya and...”

“I don’t mind,” Arya grinned. “So what are you all going to do now that you can’t kill wildlings anymore?”

“Arya,” Catelyn sighed, rubbing her forehead as Benjen chuckled.

“Truth be told, we don’t know,” he replied. “Our numbers have been dwindling ever since the Conquest, and with our primary purpose gone...”

“I thought you were there to stop the Others,” Bran piped up. “Old Nan said you were.”

“No one has seen an Other in a very, very long time,” Benjen smiled, “and we may soon enough be able to say the same of the wildlings.”

“Are they really all gone, though?” Ned asked.

“Even ones that I know for a fact would never willingly leave are gone,” Benjen replied. “There was one among them who lived in what could almost be called a keep with his...family, and when we went to question him about what had happened, we found him dead and the rest of them gone.”

“How could this even happen, though?” Jon asked. “I mean, ignoring the bizarre fact that it did without any of you noticing until it was too late, every tribe of them had to be either conquered or convinced to come by whoever managed to sneak a fleet of ships to the shore without anyone noticing that either.”

“It shouldn’t be possible,” Benjen replied. “Our best guess is that one among them managed to unite the tribes, become their ‘king beyond the wall,’ and then managed to convince them not to turn south but east, having somehow acquired outside help. They didn’t build the ships and sail them themselves, I can guarantee that.”

“Why Ib?” Robb asked. “If any of the maps of Essos I’ve ever seen are to be believed, it’s so far away.”

“The Free Cities would crush any force that came their way, and even if they managed to sneak past them and into the lands beyond their control, they’d be at the mercy of the Dothraki,” Ned replied. “I can’t say I know much of Ib, but it might very well be a safer bet for them than anywhere in Essos could be.”

“It’s also about as far north as our lands,” Jon pointed out. “If that means the same thing in Essos as it does here, it should be about as cold, so they wouldn’t have to worry about weather they’re not used to.”

“Well reasoned,” Benjen murmured. “We’re going to keep searching for them, but...all we’ve managed to find so far are tracks leading to the eastern shore. The scale of this must have been utterly vast.”

“Making it all the stranger that no one noticed,” Ned said, scratching his chin. “I know that Eastmarch is undermanned, but...”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Benjen sighed. “I might have expected the Manderlys to notice that something was amiss, but...”

“Their fleet seldom moves that far north,” Ned said. “I would have expected Braavos to notice, though.”

“Maybe Braavos is behind it,” Jon mused.

“Why would Braavos do this?” Sansa asked, confused.

“Uncle Benjen, you’ve said before that you’ve found slavers in the lands beyond the Wall, right?” Jon asked.

“We have,” Benjen replied. “They know better than to target our people, as that would be an act of war, but they do go after the wildlings on occasion.”

“Braavos hates slavery too,” Jon replied. “Maybe they thought that moving the wildlings further away would mean fewer slave ships passing through their waters on the way to the Shivering Sea.”

“I think you’re underestimating the sheer cost of a venture of this scale, son,” Ned replied gently. “The Sealord would not dedicate the kind of resources this required just to give his enemies fewer reasons to come near his city, especially when his fleet is one of the most capable in the world.”

“In my defense, it’s not like anything else makes sense here,” Jon replied, and Benjen chuckled, shaking his head.

“Why do you think I came in person?” he asked. “I didn’t think that you’d believe this if we just sent a letter, and both the Lord Commander and I agree that His Grace is unlikely to believe it unless you confirm it for him.”

“He sent a raven to King’s Landing then?” Ned asked. When Benjen nodded, he said, “I’ll await Robert’s letter then.”

“Do you think the Night’s Watch might end up disbanded?” Theon asked, piping up for the first time since the other Stark arrived.

“We can’t just disband it for numerous reasons, but...things are going to change if it turns out that there truly are no wildlings left up north,” Benjen replied.

As he launched into a quick explanation of why the Night’s Watch would remain important to the realm even if they ended up having little to do going forward, Jon sat back and finished the last of his venison pie. There was a time when he considered joining his uncle at the Wall, when he was a young boy still wondering what he was going to do with his life. Those notions had fled him the moment he realized just how fond he was of women.

“I wonder how whoever did this managed to pull it off without the Night’s Watch noticing,” he thought to himself.

“It’s not like this hasn’t happened before,” Arya piped up. “Princess Nymeria managed to sneak thousands of her people away by ship, and she was escaping people who could fly.”

“That’s a good point,” Benjen chuckled, though if the look in his gray eyes was any indication, he wasn’t quite as amused as he sounded.

“Looks like this old dog still has a few tricks to teach,” Benjen grinned a while later as he offered Jon his hand, having knocked him on his arse.

“You’re hardly old,” Jon said as he took it and let himself be pulled back up, “and that makes us tied.”

“I think we can stay tied for the night,” Benjen said, returning his blunted training blade to the rack. “I barely took any breaks on the way here. My poor horse and I are both likely to sleep like the dead.”

“Thank the gods you got here before that storm started, short though it ended up being,” Jon murmured as he returned his own training blade.

“I’ve been out in worse,” Benjen said. “I must say, Jon, it’s nice to see you at the high table with the rest of them.”

“I have been for years now,” Jon pointed out.

“Yes, but...you know there was a time when...you weren’t,” Benjen replied, and Jon nodded. “There were objections the one time I brought it up.”

“Those objections went away after the fifth anniversary of...that night,” he replied. “Her ladyship will never be fond of me, but we do have some things in common.”

“I could hardly believe it when I got Ned’s letter,” Benjen said. “You were a brave lad.”

“He’s my brother,” Jon murmured. “I...”

“Jon!” Arya exclaimed as she ran out onto the training yard, looking annoyed. “You’ve tortured me enough.”

“I suppose I have,” Jon chuckled, reaching into the chest that he’d stored his sword and a few other things in when he started sparring with his uncle.

“You’re not giving me Red Rain, are you?” Arya asked jokingly, and he snorted.

“Red Rain is still bigger than you,” Jon said, earning a glare from his sister, though it quickly disappeared as he pulled out what was clearly a different sword. Short and thin, it was in a style that, as he discussed the matter with Mikken, their local smith, he eventually agreed would be perfect for his sister.

“Ned’s going to kill you,” Benjen chuckled as Arya squealed.

“Really?!” she exclaimed, reaching for the hilt.

“It is not without conditions,” Jon replied firmly, lifting it out of her reach. “I actually did discuss this with Father, who eventually agreed. He’ll go over the rules tomorrow, but the basic idea is that you will treat it as the dangerous weapon it is and agree to use it only after you’ve finished your training, and that training will be conditional on you putting greater effort into the rest of your education. That last one was the only way your mother was ever going to accept this.”

“They know?” Arya asked.

“If I’d tried to teach you how to wield it myself, we’d have gotten caught eventually and they’d have taken it away,” Jon replied before handing it to her. “I convinced Father, who in turn convinced Lady Catelyn, that you might resist the more ladylike pursuits that she would prefer you take more seriously less if you knew that a reward like this existed.”

She unsheathed it slowly, looking down at the thin little blade in awe and brushing her thumb over Mikken’s mark.

“It’s tiny,” Arya murmured.

“A blade should suit its wielder,” Benjen remarked, grinning when she glared at him.

“He is right,” Jon added. “I didn’t start wielding Red Rain when I first got it, did I?”

“How would I know?” Arya asked, setting the sheathe down and slashing through the air experimentally a few times. “I was just a babe then.”

“It took him years to be able to wield it,” Benjen replied for him. “That blade is more for stabbing than slashing, by the way.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Arya murmured, poking it at the air. “So will I start joining all of you in the training yard every day?”

“No,” Jon replied. “Your mother...very reluctantly agreed to this at all, and one of her conditions was that the fact that you’re being taught to use a blade be kept relatively quiet. You will be taught and trained, but it won’t be out in the open like that.”

Arya grumbled at that but said nothing as she sheathed her sword and hugged him.

“Thank you,” Arya whispered. “No one understands me like you do, Jon.”

“You’re welcome,” Jon replied. “Now this does mean that you need to put actual effort into your needlework.”

“Ugh,” Arya groaned. “It’s so boring, and I’m terrible at it.”

“Yes, but this isn’t boring,” Jon said, tapping the pommel of her blade, and she sighed, nodding.

“I’m going to find a place for it in my chambers,” Arya murmured. “Thank you again, Jon, really.”

“That was kind of you,” Benjen said once she was out of earshot.

"I knew it would mean a lot to her," Jon replied. "I used what you told me the last time we spoke, about how she reminded you so much of our aunt, to convince Father, and he managed to convince Lady Catelyn."

"She does," Benjen sighed, looking down at that. "So, I guess it's for the best that you decided against joining us."

"You're sure the order won't be disbanded?" Jon asked and Benjen shook his head.

"We'd have to execute half the men if we did," he replied. "Not all or even most of us joined willingly, after all, and if we did disband it, the lords of this realm would lose a useful tool for times when executing a man you can't let go would be...ill advised. It is possible that whoever did this missed a few tribes still, and if that's the case, the wildlings will simply repopulate in the decades to come and our old problems with them will come again."

"If they are all gone, though...what if they come back?" Jon asked.

"I doubt half of them will make it Ib, and I also doubt that the Ibbenese will be particularly welcoming to them," Benjen replied. "My guess is that someone very wealthy and at least half-mad thought that he could use them as a vanguard force for an invasion of Ib, hoping that they'd cause as much damage as possible, getting themselves killed in the process, so that his army would find a softened target."

"That's...incredibly dishonorable," Jon replied.

"Honor doesn't mean the same thing to all men," Benjen said, "and this would, most likely, be an Essosi magister, not a Westerosi lord. Our peoples have very different ideas of what is and isn't acceptable."

"Right," Jon nodded. "At least your life should be safer going forward."

"I might die of boredom," Benjen quipped, making him laugh. "I am tired, so I'm going to turn in."

"Sleep well," Jon smiled. "I'll stay out here a little longer."

Benjen nodded at that before turning and going inside, leaving him alone. Jon took a deep breath, going over everything that had happened that day before clearing his mind and grabbing his sword. He reattached the scabbard to his belt before drawing the bastard sword. Red Rain was a remarkable weapon, as anything made of Valyrian steel was. Unlike Ice, which was a very dark gray, with even darker ripples throughout it, Red Rain had very significant red ripples throughout, which contrasted with the almost black color of the rest of the steel.

Gripping the hilt with both hands, he ran through his favorite training drills from Ser Rodrik, moving with the sort of fluid grace that only came from years of extensive training and practice. The blade cut through the air again and again, every slash flawlessly moving into the next one as he practiced the familiar movements. In the moons following his near abduction by the Ironborn, training with a blade had been one of the few things he did that brought him any peace. Sleeping was difficult for a long while, and during the day it was almost worse. Every little sound made him jump, and any male voice he didn't recognize he swore was one of the pirates come back for him. With a blade in hand, though, even if it wasn't that particular blade, he felt safer and more able to focus, and while the worst of what he suffered after that night had long since gone away, training with Red Rain soothed him like nothing else did.

“Caw!” a raven croaked, and Jon went still, turning to look at the black bird standing near one of the lanterns he’d set up to let his uncle and him spar in the dark.

“The rookery is that way, little...” Jon went to say in amusement when he noticed the letter tied to the bird’s leg. “Is something wrong with you?”

He approached the bird slowly, feeling more and more certain that something was wrong with the little creature when it barely reacted. Not wanting a letter to get lost because a raven was having an off day, he picked it up and untied the letter, jumping back when the bird immediately flew out of his arms the moment he was finished.

“Bizarre,” he muttered to himself, watching the bird fly off before looking down at the letter. “Well, I should get this to Maester...”

Jon.

It was carved in the wax that sealed the letter, three unmistakable letters carved into the otherwise bare wax sealing something that had been practically delivered to him personally. That wasn’t how ravens operated, he knew, as they flew from one rookery to another, allowing the local maester to retrieve the letters they’d been given and sort through them on behalf of their lord. For one to deliver a letter personally like that was weird, and to deliver it to the right person was impossible, and yet he held just such a letter in his hands.

“What in the world?” he asked as he opened the letter and started reading its contents.

If you want to learn about your mother, come to the larger inn in Winter Town. I’ll be wearing silver.

Two sentences, two short sentences were all that the letter gave him, and yet that was enough to make his heart race in his chest. He’d wanted to know who his mother was all his life, more than almost anything, and every time he’d brought it up with his father, he’d been denied. The idea of someone else being able to tell him was one that he’d never considered seriously, though it stood to reason that someone else out there might have known.

“I was made during the rebellion,” Jon thought to himself. “Perhaps one of the men knew who Father laid with back then, but why come to me like this and why in this matter? No, this is too bizarre and more than a little suspicious. I should bring this to Father and...”

He was about to shove the letter in the sleeve of his tunic when the wind blew his way, and he noticed something about it that he hadn’t before. Bringing the parchment closer to his face so he could double-check, his breath hitched when he realized that he was right. Perfume: the letter had the distinct scent of perfume on it.

“Roses and...something else,” he thought to himself, his eyes going wide as a possibility he barely dared consider occurred to him. “Mother?”

He blinked repeatedly at the thought, his eyes going misty. How many times as a boy had he wished to meet her, to see her and hear her voice and wrap his arms around her? Part of him knew it was a fool’s hope, a terrible hope that would only disappoint him, but...if there was even the slightest chance that she had come for him, come to meet him at last...

“That might explain why she didn’t reach out to me through Father,” he thought to himself, trying to justify the idea. “Could they have parted on poor terms, or could she just fear that Lady Catelyn would be wrathful at seeing her?”

Before he even realized that he’d made up his mind about what to do, he had sheathed his sword and started making his way towards the main gate. It was a little late to be venturing out of the castle, but the guards knew him well enough to know that they could trust him, and the pair standing guard barely said a word as he marched past them. He knew what inn she meant, as while it wasn’t the only one in town, it was by far the largest, and within a few minutes, he was walking through its doors, looking around for any sign of a woman in silver.

“Jon?” Herl, the proprietor of the inn, asked as he spotted him, though he barely heard him, focused as he was on the figure in the corner.

She was sitting by herself, facing away from him, wearing a large silver cloak with the hood pulled up over her head.

“That woman,” Jon said, making his way over to the bar Herl was standing behind. “Has she been here long?”

“Maybe an hour,” Herl replied. “Why?”

“I think she might be...I think she might have information I need,” Jon replied quietly, giving him a pointed look.

“Ah, for his lordship,” Herl whispered, and Jon didn’t correct him.

“I’ll take a cup of the strongest thing you have,” he murmured, sliding a few coins over to him, and the man nodded.

“You might want a half cup of this,” Herl said as he poured him something dark. “I keep a barrel of this ale around for when I want to send a particularly annoying customer up to the bed. Dark as sin and strong enough to knock letter men right on their arses.”

“Sounds good to me right now,” Jon muttered, knowing he was going to need something to bolster his courage here. “Thank you and...not a word about seeing me here.”

“I know what not to stick my broken beak in,” Herl replied. “Good luck with...whatever this is.”

“Thank you,” Jon replied, taking a sip of the beer and finding it to indeed be far stronger than he was used to.

It wasn’t unpleasant though, and he took another couple sips before making his way over to the woman. Knowing that the letter hadn’t been written by a man would have put his mind at ease about this even if he hadn’t gotten it into his head it might be someone he’d wanted to meet for his entire life. He walked over, his heart racing in his chest and his whole body tensing up as it started to feel like he might topple over if it got any worse.

“Pardon me, my la...” he went to say, and the woman sitting there just pointed to the seat across from her.

Furrowing his brow in confusion, he sat down, taking in the image of the cowed woman. Her cloak wasn't the only heavy thing she wore, as the thick white gown under it also suggested that she was not a woman used to the cold. It covered everything up to her pale neck and was so bulky that he couldn't make out of anything of her shape. The hood she had pulled up kept her entire face, save for her chin, in shadow, and her hair appeared to be pulled back as well, giving away nothing at all of what she looked like.

"I'm Jon," Jon said. "The letter I received...it was from..."

Before he could finish that sentence, she pulled the hood back, revealing a face that he'd been seeing in his dreams for nearly a decade. Heart-shaped and utterly beautiful, her face was just as he remembered, with the same prominent cheekbones, full lips, slight nose, and haunting mismatched eyes. She pulled the single braid she had her silver-gold hair tied back in over her shoulder and grinned at him.

"Good evening, Jon," she said. "My name is Shiera, and the two of us have quite a bit to discuss."

Jon just sat there in silence, too stunned to speak, as for the first time in several years he believed that he really had seen this impossible woman back in that cave.