

THE CURIOUS TALE OF THE PAJAMA KNIGHT

Volume One

A fan-made story inspired by the world of A Song of Ice
and Fire.

Prepared for The Glass Candle

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CHAPTER 1

THE PHANTOM IN PAJAMAS

At half past two in the morning, Doctor Johnathan Harrow was losing an argument with sleep. He sat propped against the headboard with an e-reader resting in one hand and the bedroom lamp turned low beside him. The light painted the room in soft amber. Everything beyond it lay in shadow. His work clothes had been abandoned in a heap near the closet. His hospital badge rested on the dresser beside his wallet, keys, and a half-empty glass of water. A pair of shoes stood near the bedroom door, still marked with dirty salt from the parking lot outside the hospital.

Johnathan had spent most of the day on his feet. Then most of the night. There had been an elderly man with chest pain who insisted it was indigestion. A frightened young woman who had arrived after a car accident. A child with a fever that refused to break. A nurse had called in sick, another physician had been delayed by the weather, and Johnathan had remained long after his shift was supposed to end. He had eaten dinner from a vending machine. Again. His girlfriend had already been asleep when he came home. She had stirred when he entered the bedroom, murmured something about the time, and fallen back beneath the blankets before he could answer.

Johnathan had showered, dressed, and climbed into bed. Then he had discovered that exhaustion and sleep were not always the same thing. His body wanted rest. His mind refused to stop moving. The red-and-black pajamas had been a Christmas gift. Tiny three-headed dragons repeated across the cloth from his shoulders to his ankles. His girlfriend had laughed when he opened them and told him that a man who spent so much time reading about dragons should at least dress properly for the occasion. Johnathan had pretended to hate them.

He wore them constantly. Now one of the dragons stretched across his knee as he shifted beneath the blankets and returned his attention to the e-reader. He had read the novel more times than he could remember with certainty. Eight times. Ten, perhaps. He had started rereading the series during medical school, when his schedule had been even worse and his sleep even less reliable. The world inside the books had become familiar company. He knew the great houses. He knew their secrets. He knew the wars before they began and the deaths long before the characters sensed danger.

Yet he continued returning to the beginning. The early chapters at Winterfell were his favorites. The Stark children were still together there. Ned Stark was alive. Robb was only a boy with a wooden sword and a future no one feared yet. Sansa still believed songs were true. Arya had not learned how much killing could change a person. Bran still climbed walls. Rickon was young enough to remain close to his mother. Jon Snow stood among them, loved by some, resented by others, and ignorant of the secret that had shaped his entire life.

The tragedy had not started yet. Or perhaps it had, but none of them knew it. Johnathan read the scene in which Bran accompanied his father to witness the execution of a deserter from the Night's Watch. He paused over the lesson Ned gave his son afterward. Fear did not prevent bravery. Fear was what made bravery necessary. Johnathan lowered the e-reader slightly. He had spoken to frightened people almost every day of his adult life. Patients afraid of pain. Parents afraid of losing children. Children afraid of doctors. Families afraid of the words they knew he might say.

He had watched people break beneath fear. He had also watched them endure things he could hardly imagine enduring himself. The difference was rarely that one person felt less fear than another. Sometimes the difference was only that someone had decided to move despite it. Johnathan looked toward the sleeping shape beside him. He should put the book down. He had

another shift the following afternoon. There were messages he had not answered. Laundry he had not folded. A list of ordinary responsibilities waiting to reclaim him as soon as morning arrived.

Instead, he returned to the page. Bran and the others were riding through the summer snow. The direwolf pups were waiting beside their dead mother. Johnathan knew every moment before he read it. He knew Jon would exclude himself when counting the pups. He knew the white wolf would be found apart from the others. He knew how important those animals would become. He also knew everything that followed. That knowledge made even the gentle scenes painful. He imagined, not for the first time, what he would do if he could enter the story.

The thought was childish. It was also comforting. He would warn Ned Stark before King Robert arrived. He would tell him not to trust Petyr Baelish. He would explain what Jon Arryn had discovered. He would keep Bran away from the broken tower. He would tell Jon the truth, though even in imagination Johnathan never knew when the right moment would be.

He would warn the Night's Watch that the dead were moving beyond the Wall. He would give them dragonglass. He would stop Robb from riding south. He would save them. All of them, if he could. Johnathan smiled faintly at his own arrogance. He was a physician, not a general. He had never held a sword. He had never ridden a horse outside a supervised trail. He could explain the circulatory system, perform emergency procedures, diagnose infections, and spend twenty minutes arguing with an insurance company.

None of that meant he could survive a week in Westeros. He would probably offend the wrong lord before breakfast and lose his head by lunch. Still, the thought remained. If I knew what was coming, perhaps I could change it. His eyes moved across another line without understanding it. He blinked and read the same sentence again. Then a third time.

The words blurred. The e-reader slowly lowered against his chest. Johnathan closed his eyes for what he intended to be a moment. The bedroom lamp continued to glow beside him. Snow whispered against the windows. Somewhere beyond the closed door, the heating system began another quiet cycle. Johnathan Harrow fell asleep while Winterfell waited beneath his hand.

He awakened because something cold and wet touched his face. His first thought was that the bedroom window had been left open. His second was that the roof was leaking. Neither thought survived the moment he opened his eyes. Snowflakes drifted down through a canopy of black branches. Johnathan stared upward. For several seconds, he did nothing.

A flake settled on his eyelashes. Another landed against his cheek. Above him, ancient trees rose into darkness, their limbs bent beneath the weight of snow. There was no ceiling. No lamp. No headboard. No bedroom. Johnathan sat up sharply. Snow fell from his chest and shoulders. Both hands sank wrist-deep into the white powder beside him.

The silence was enormous. It was not the silence of a quiet room or an empty hospital corridor. It was heavy and complete, as though the entire forest had been buried beneath the snow with him. Johnathan looked around. He was sitting in a shallow hollow between two enormous trees. Their roots had twisted through the frozen earth like knotted fingers. Snow covered the ground in every direction, broken only by stones, fallen branches, and dark patches where the wind had exposed dead leaves beneath. His e-reader was gone.

So was the bed. So was the house.

"What the hell?"

His voice sounded wrong in the forest. Too loud. Too small. Johnathan pushed himself to his feet and nearly slipped. His bare toes dug into the snow. Bare feet. He looked down. The Targaryen pajamas were still there.

The little dragons stared back at him. For one absurd moment, that was the detail that frightened him most. He turned in a slow circle.

"Hello?"

Nothing answered.

"Is someone there?"

Only the soft hiss of falling snow. Johnathan lifted both hands to his face. He felt his forehead, temples, and the back of his skull. No swelling. No blood. No obvious injury. He closed one eye, then the other. His vision remained clear. He held both hands in front of him and moved his fingers. No tremor. No weakness.

He smiled deliberately, then bared his teeth, testing the muscles of his face. Everything seemed symmetrical. He raised both arms. He repeated his name, location, and the date as he remembered it.

"Johnathan Harrow. Ohio. Home from work. I was reading in bed."

The last part sounded less convincing when spoken aloud. He searched the snow for anything he recognized. There was no phone. No wallet. No badge. No clothing except the pajamas. No footprints leading toward him.

That was impossible. Even if someone had carried him into the woods, there should have been tracks. If he had wandered there himself, barefoot and unconscious, his own trail should have cut through the snow. There was nothing. The snow surrounding the hollow was smooth. Untouched. Johnathan crouched and brushed his fingers over it. The texture was exact. Fine crystals clung to his skin. He could feel the weight of them. He could feel moisture where the warmth of his fingers began to melt the edges.

But he did not feel cold. That realization came slowly. Then all at once. He looked at his bare feet again. They were buried to the ankles. He should have been in agony. The temperature had to be well below freezing. He was wearing thin pajamas intended for a

heated suburban house. His skin should have been burning from exposure. His toes should already have been numb.

Instead, he felt comfortable. Not warm. Not cold. Simply unchanged. Johnathan stood quickly.

"No."

He rubbed his arms. His skin felt smooth beneath his hands. Too smooth. He pressed his palm against his chest. No shivering. He knew hypothermia. He had treated it. Severe exposure could produce confusion. It could make a dying person believe they were warm. Paradoxical undressing was real. So were delirium, arrhythmia, and loss of coordination.

His ability to reason did not prove that he was safe. Johnathan crouched again and gathered a handful of snow. He pressed it against the inside of his forearm, where the skin was sensitive. He felt pressure. Wetness. Nothing more. He held it there until the snow began slipping between his fingers. There was no pain.

He threw it aside. His medical training took control because panic had no useful instructions to offer. Airway. Breathing. Circulation. He opened his mouth and drew in a deep breath. The air entered his lungs. At least he thought it did. There was no sharpness in his throat. No cold sting in his chest. He exhaled toward the darkness and watched carefully. No mist appeared. Johnathan breathed out again, harder this time. Nothing. His breath should have clouded. He placed one hand against his chest and inhaled. His ribs moved because he made them move. But there was no hunger for air before the breath. No relief after it. He stopped breathing. One second. Two. Five.

Ten. Twenty. His body did not protest. Johnathan's mouth slowly opened. He waited longer. There was no tightness in his chest. No rising urge. No reflex forcing him to breathe. He finally inhaled because continuing the test frightened him.

"No. No, that isn't possible."

He placed two fingers against his left wrist. He searched for the radial pulse. Nothing. He adjusted his fingers and pressed more firmly. Still nothing. Cold made peripheral pulses difficult

to detect. He knew that. Poor positioning could do the same. Fear could make even a trained physician clumsy. He moved his fingers to his neck and searched along the carotid artery.

Nothing. Johnathan pressed harder. He changed sides. He tilted his head. There was no beat beneath his fingertips. His heart should have been hammering. He should have felt it in his chest, his throat, his temples.

He felt nothing. The forest seemed to lean closer around him. Johnathan stepped backward until his shoulders touched the rough bark of a tree.

"I'm disoriented."

His voice trembled even if his body did not.

"This is a dream. Or a seizure. Carbon monoxide. A medication exposure. Something."

He had taken no medication. He had not been drinking. The detectors in the house worked. He knew because he had changed their batteries himself. Johnathan pinched the inside of his arm hard enough to bruise. He felt pressure. There was a dull awareness of force.

But almost no pain. He twisted harder. His skin remained pale and unmarked. A hallucination could feel real. Dreams could feel real. People experiencing psychosis did not necessarily know that their perceptions were false. There was no diagnostic test he could perform in a frozen forest with no equipment. He needed help.

A road. A building. Another person. Johnathan stepped away from the tree and looked through the darkness. The forest was unfamiliar, but not entirely. The trees disturbed him. Some were broad oaks with gnarled limbs. Others were tall, grey-green sentinels with needles gathered thickly along their branches. Ironwoods, he thought before he could stop himself.

The name came from the book. That proved nothing. His mind was frightened and searching for familiar patterns. He could be somewhere in northern Canada. Alaska. A protected forest. A

private reserve. He might have been abducted. Drugged. Transported.

Placed in the snow without tracks by someone who had deliberately covered them. That explanation was ridiculous. It was still more reasonable than the alternatives gathering in his thoughts. Johnathan began walking. He chose a direction at random, guided only by the slight downward slope of the ground. Water and roads often followed low terrain. If he found a stream, he might find people. The first few steps were cautious. Then he stepped on something sharp beneath the snow.

A stone drove into the arch of his bare foot. Johnathan lurched and grabbed a tree. He waited for the pain. It never arrived. He lifted his foot and examined it. The skin was unbroken. No cut.

No blood. He pressed the same spot with his thumb. Nothing. Johnathan set his foot down slowly. The forest floor was uneven. Roots waited beneath the snow. Branches caught against his pajama legs. He could feel each impact, but the sensations were distant and muted. It was like wearing thick protective clothing over his entire body. Except he was not.

The pajamas were thin enough that he could see the outline of his knees through the fabric. He walked faster. The trees closed around him. There were no roads. No utility poles. No glow from distant towns. He listened for aircraft and heard none. No engines. No gunshots. No machinery. Once, something small moved beneath a fallen log. Johnathan stopped and stared until a dark shape vanished into the brush. He continued.

Minutes passed. Perhaps an hour. He had no way to measure time. The sky remained dark, though the blackness had begun to soften between the branches. Johnathan's feet left clear impressions behind him now. That was almost comforting. Whatever had happened before his awakening, he could prove to himself that he was moving through a physical place. He followed his own trail backward with his eyes. The prints began

several yards behind him and continued into the darkness. No trick.

No sudden disappearance. He turned forward again. Think. The command had carried him through medical emergencies, family arguments, exams, sleepless nights, and moments when other people needed him to remain calm. Think first. Panic later. He considered his symptoms.

Absent cold sensation. No visible breath. No respiratory drive. No detectable pulse. Reduced pain. Possible hallucination. Possible dissociation.

Possible severe neurological impairment. Possible death. Johnathan stopped walking. He refused to think that word again. A dead man did not stand in a forest analyzing his own condition. A dead man did not make footprints. He kept moving.

A branch struck him across the face. Johnathan flinched, then touched his cheek. No cut. No pain. The branch had been stiff enough to draw blood from a normal person. Another piece of evidence. Evidence of what, he did not know. The forest grew denser ahead. He turned sideways to pass between two trees and heard something behind him. A soft crunch. Johnathan stopped.

The sound stopped too. He looked over his shoulder. Nothing. Snow drifted through the branches. He waited. Another crunch came from farther to his right. Not a branch falling.

A footstep. Johnathan slowly crouched and reached for a length of wood half-buried beside a root. He pulled it free. The branch was thick, nearly as long as his arm. One end had split into a jagged point. He gripped it with both hands.

"Hello?"

Silence. Johnathan turned toward the sound. A low growl rolled through the trees. It was deep enough that he felt it more than heard it. Every rational thought vanished. A grey shape moved between two trunks. The animal stepped into the open.

It was a wolf. Larger than any wolf Johnathan had seen outside a screen. Its shoulders were high, its body lean beneath thick smoke-grey fur. Snow clung to its back. Yellow eyes fixed on

him with an intelligence that made him feel examined. Its lips pulled away from long white teeth. Johnathan remained still. Do not run. The instruction surfaced from documentaries and wilderness safety articles, none of which he remembered reading carefully enough to trust. Running could trigger pursuit.

Direct eye contact might be interpreted as aggression. Appear large. Do not turn your back. He held the branch horizontally.

"Easy."

The wolf lowered its head. Johnathan's mouth had gone dry, although he had no memory of thirst before that moment.

"I'm not food."

The animal took another step. Johnathan stepped backward. The wolf advanced. He tried to remember whether wolves commonly attacked adult humans. That question seemed less useful when the wolf was close enough for him to see the wet black surface of its nose.

"Go away."

The growl deepened. Johnathan tightened his grip. He knew where to strike if the animal attacked. The eyes. The nose. The throat if he could reach it. Protect the neck. Stay on his feet. He had treated dog bites. He had never fought anything larger than an angry house cat. The wolf moved suddenly. Johnathan raised the branch.

The animal lunged. Its mouth opened. He saw the teeth. He saw the tongue behind them. He threw both arms across his face. There was no impact. No weight.

No tearing pain. For one impossible moment, the wolf entered him. Grey fur passed through his chest. Its skull moved through his raised forearms. Johnathan saw the animal inside the outline of his own body, as if both of them had become reflections trapped in the same piece of glass. A freezing brightness flashed across his vision. The wolf landed behind him. Johnathan spun. The animal crashed into the snow and rolled onto its side. It scrambled upright, whining in confusion.

The branch had fallen from Johnathan's hands. He looked down at himself. The forest floor was visible through his fingers. His hands were pale outlines. Transparent. The tiny dragons on his sleeves seemed to float without flesh beneath them. He lifted one hand toward his face and watched snowflakes pass through his palm without slowing. Johnathan screamed.

The sound tore out of him with such force that the wolf recoiled. His body flickered. For a moment his chest was solid. Then it faded again. He could see the dark trunk of a tree through his ribs. The wolf backed away. Johnathan stared at his own hands as they shifted between flesh and shadow.

"Stop."

He did not know whether he was speaking to himself, the wolf, or whatever was happening.

"Stop. Stop it."

His fingers became solid. Then transparent. Then solid again. The wolf turned and ran. It vanished between the trees, leaving a broken trail in the snow. Johnathan remained where he was. His hands slowly returned.

Color first. Then weight. Then the ordinary illusion of normal flesh. He touched his chest. Solid. He pressed both hands against his face. Solid.

He looked behind him at the place where the wolf had landed. The marks were there. Furrowed snow. Claw prints. A scattering of grey hairs caught on a branch. Not imagined. Not a dream. The animal had passed through him. Johnathan bent and retrieved the fallen branch. His fingers closed around it without difficulty.

He struck the nearest tree. The branch broke with a sharp crack. The impact traveled through his arms as pressure without pain. Half the branch fell into the snow. Johnathan stared at the broken end remaining in his hand. He was solid now. He could affect objects.

The wolf should have hit him. It should have torn into his arms and face. Instead, it had gone through him as though he had not been there. Johnathan dropped the wood. His mind searched

for explanations and found none. Some form of matter displacement. A neurological event.

An elaborate dream. A psychotic episode. A simulation. Death. He stood alone among the trees while the sky slowly lightened.

"I need to find someone."

The words sounded less certain now. Finding another person might bring help. It might also bring witnesses. Johnathan began walking again. He moved faster. He no longer worried about branches or sharp stones. He crossed the forest with long strides, looking behind him every few minutes for the wolf. It did not return.

The slope began to rise. Johnathan climbed. Snow reached his calves in places. His bare feet sank and emerged, sank and emerged. He should have been exhausted. The muscles in his thighs should have burned. His breathing should have quickened. Nothing changed. He reached the top of the rise without effort. There, the trees thinned. Johnathan stopped.

Beyond the forest stood something vast and black against the dying night. At first, he mistook it for a mountain. Then he saw the towers. One rose square and heavy above the trees. Another was round, its crown broken against the sky. Walls stretched outward from them, enormous and layered, their dark surfaces interrupted by small points of orange light. Steam drifted above the battlements. Johnathan did not move. His mind recognized the place before he allowed himself to speak its name.

"No."

The fortress stood in a broad clearing beneath the pale sky. Two defensive walls surrounded it, separated by what appeared to be a deep ditch or open killing ground. Towers rose at irregular intervals, each different from the others, as if the castle had been built and rebuilt across thousands of years. It was too large. Far larger than any castle Johnathan had visited. Far larger than any television set or digital creation. It was not a single building. It was a fortified city. Steam rose from within it in pale clouds, touched by the first weak light of dawn.

Hot springs. Johnathan remembered the descriptions. Water heated beneath the earth and carried through the walls. Warm stone in the middle of northern winter. Glass gardens. Ancient crypts. A broken tower. His legs carried him forward several steps before he realized he was moving.

"Winterfell."

The name disappeared into the snow. Johnathan stood at the edge of the ridge, staring. A section of the outer wall became visible as the sky brightened. He saw banners hanging near one of the towers. Grey shapes on pale fields. Too distant to make out clearly, but he did not need to see them. A direwolf. The sigil of House Stark.

He turned away from the castle and pressed both hands against the sides of his head.

"This is not happening."

He looked back. Winterfell remained. He shut his eyes. Counted to five. Opened them. Nothing changed. The fortress was still there.

Smoke and steam climbed from its roofs. Tiny figures moved along the battlements. A horn sounded in the distance, low and mournful. Johnathan's body did not react to cold or exhaustion, but something inside him trembled. He remembered the e-reader on his chest. The chapter he had been reading. Bran riding beside his father. The deserter. The direwolves.

Had those things already happened? Were they happening now? There was snow on the ground, but the story had begun during the long summer. Summer snows were common in the North. That gave him no answer. He searched the roads surrounding the castle. No royal procession. No forest of crowned stag banners. No long lines of wagons, knights, servants, horses, and retainers.

King Robert had not arrived. That meant Johnathan might be standing near the beginning. Jon Arryn might already be dead. The raven might already be flying. Or perhaps the Hand still lived in King's Landing, opening the book that would doom him.

Johnathan looked toward the towers again. Bran Stark might be inside those walls.

Alive. Walking. Climbing. Ned might still be Lord of Winterfell and nothing more. Robb might still believe wars were songs and lessons in the yard. Arya might be running through passages with dirty knees. Sansa might be dreaming of princes.

Jon Snow might be preparing to leave for the Wall. They were not memories. They were here. The thought brought an unexpected pressure behind Johnathan's eyes. For years, he had known these people as names printed on pages. He had worried for them, argued about them, mourned them, and returned to their stories whenever the real world became too exhausting. But stories did not have mornings when no one was reading. Characters did not wake hungry.

They did not laugh in rooms the audience never saw. They did not stand somewhere behind distant walls while a stranger watched from the forest. Unless they were not characters. Unless they had always been people. Johnathan looked down at his pajamas. The three-headed dragons seemed suddenly enormous. House Targaryen.

The dynasty that had ruled Westeros for nearly three centuries. The family whose last king had burned Ned Stark's father alive and forced his brother to strangle himself trying to save him. Johnathan was standing outside Winterfell wearing their sigil from neck to ankle.

"Perfect."

If the guards saw him, they would not see novelty pajamas. They would see a declaration. A threat. Perhaps a spy. Perhaps an assassin sent by exiles across the narrow sea. He could not exactly explain that the clothing came from a company that printed fictional symbols on mass-produced sleepwear.

Machine-made fabric would create more questions than it answered.

So would Ohio. So would Earth. So would anything about him. Johnathan turned his attention to the forest behind him. He could hide there. Wait. Observe.

Decide what to say. But hiding would not solve anything. He needed shelter, information, and some understanding of what had happened to him. Winterfell had a maester. Maester Luwin might examine him, though Johnathan doubted the Citadel had a diagnosis for a man without a pulse who could become transparent. More importantly, Johnathan knew what was coming. If the story had not changed, then the Starks were in danger. His first instinct was to run directly to Eddard Stark and tell him everything. Jon Arryn was murdered.

Cersei's children were Jaime's. Petyr Baelish could not be trusted. Bran must be kept away from the broken tower. Do not go south. Do not arrest Tyrion. Do not trust the Freys. Do not send Theon to Pyke. The warnings crowded into his thoughts until they became noise. What would Ned do if a barefoot stranger in dragon clothing appeared and claimed to know the future? He would have the man seized. Questioned. Perhaps executed as a spy or madman. And Johnathan did not yet know whether a sword could harm him. A wolf could not touch him when his body changed.

But he had not controlled it. If Ice came down upon his neck while he remained solid, he might learn the answer for only a fraction of a second. Johnathan began descending the ridge toward the castle. He moved carefully at first. Then faster. The distance deceived him. Winterfell looked close enough to reach within minutes. After twenty minutes of walking, it seemed barely nearer. Its scale distorted the surrounding land. What had appeared to be a narrow clearing was a wide expanse of fields, frozen streams, roads, and scattered woodland.

He continued. The sky turned grey. The towers became clearer. Johnathan followed a shallow stream beneath a crust of ice, then crossed a narrow road marked by wagon tracks. He

crouched to study them. Hoofprints. Iron-rimmed wheels. No tire marks.

No modern tread. He touched one of the tracks as if that might prove something. A piece of frozen horse dung lay nearby. Johnathan almost laughed. His mind had accepted transparent hands more easily than medieval animal waste. He walked on. He began counting his steps out of habit.

He lost track after a thousand. There was still no fatigue. No burning in his legs. No aching in his feet. He stopped deliberately and examined his body again. His pulse remained absent. His skin was cold beneath his own fingers.

Not cold from the air. Cold from within. The realization forced him to pull his hand away. Johnathan looked at the trail behind him. He had walked through deep snow for what felt like hours. A healthy person would have been sweating despite the temperature. His clothing should have been damp. His muscles should have demanded rest. He felt exactly as he had when he awakened. He did not even feel hungry. Whatever he was, his body no longer behaved like a living human body.

"Later," he whispered. He would think about it later. The word was a promise and a lie. The closer he came to Winterfell, the more details emerged. The walls were built from dark grey stone. The outer wall stood lower than the inner one, but both were formidable. Towers guarded the approaches. Wooden hoardings jutted above sections of battlement. Smoke rose from chimneys in uneven columns. Ravens circled above one tower. A group of mounted men followed a road toward a distant gate. Johnathan dropped behind a low stone wall before they could see him. He watched through a gap. The riders wore mail beneath heavy cloaks. Spears rose above their shoulders. One carried a banner marked by the grey direwolf. Real armor. Real horses. Real men. Their voices carried faintly across the field, but Johnathan could not understand the words from that distance. He waited until they passed. Then a dog barked somewhere behind him. Johnathan spun. No animal was visible. Another bark answered

from within the castle. Soon several dogs were barking. He crouched lower. If he approached openly, the guards would see the pajamas immediately. He needed a way to reach the wall without drawing attention. Johnathan remembered the wolf. His hands becoming transparent. The animal passing through him. He looked at his fingers.

"All right."

He closed his eyes and concentrated. Become less visible. The instruction felt childish. Nothing happened. He tightened his focus. He imagined the wolf leaping through him. He remembered seeing the tree through his own hand. He tried to recreate the terror that had triggered it. His fingers faded. Johnathan opened his eyes. The tips were translucent. He nearly lost concentration from surprise. Color returned for a moment.

"No. Stay."

He focused again. The change spread across his hands and wrists. His arms became pale and indistinct beneath the sleeves. The dragon patterns remained visible longer than his flesh, hovering like faint stains in the air. His chest flickered. Johnathan could see the snow through himself. He took one careful step. The effect held. Another.

The world looked strange through his own body, distorted as if viewed through moving water. He was not invisible. Not completely. A person staring directly at him might still see a pale outline and the faint red shapes of the dragons. But against the snow, steam, and weak dawn light, he might pass unnoticed from a distance. Johnathan moved from cover. He crossed the open ground toward the outer wall. Every step demanded concentration.

Do not be seen. Do not be solid. Do not think about what you are doing. A patrol appeared along the wall above him. Johnathan froze. Two guards walked between the towers, their cloaks moving in the wind. One carried a bow. Neither looked down. Johnathan continued.

A dog trotted beside a man near the base of the wall ahead. The animal stopped. Its head turned directly toward Johnathan. He stopped too. The dog stared. Its ears flattened. A low growl carried across the snow. The man holding the leash looked down at it.

"What is it?"

The language was English. Not exactly modern English. The accent was rougher, the rhythm different, but Johnathan understood it without difficulty. The dog refused to move. Its eyes remained fixed on him. Johnathan held his concentration. The guard searched the empty ground. He saw nothing.

"Come on, then."

The man pulled the leash. The dog backed away from Johnathan before finally following. Johnathan waited until they disappeared around the curve of the wall. Animals could sense him. That was another fact he would prefer not to have. He reached the outer wall near a smaller gate reinforced with dark iron bands. The Hunter's Gate, perhaps.

He was not certain. Winterfell had several gates, and the books had never given him a convenient guided tour. The stone beside the gate felt different. Johnathan placed one hand against it. Warmth moved through the wall. Not enough to heat his skin, but enough for him to recognize the contrast. The castle's hot springs carried life through the stone, just as the books had described. Steam escaped through a narrow channel near the foundation. Johnathan looked upward.

The wall rose high above him. A normal man could not climb it. Even if he managed, archers would see him before he reached the battlements. He considered passing through it. The wolf had passed through him. That did not mean he could pass through stone. Experimenting with a fortress wall seemed like a good way to become trapped inside one. Instead, he lowered himself beside the gate where an angle of masonry concealed him from the road. The stone supported his back.

From the other side, Johnathan heard the castle waking. Chains rattled. Horses stamped against wooden floors. Men shouted instructions. Someone laughed. A bell rang from deep within Winterfell. The sound was heavy and old.

Johnathan closed his eyes. The people behind the wall had no idea he existed. Ned Stark might be breaking his fast. Catelyn might be overseeing the household. The children might still be asleep. Or perhaps Bran was already outside, trying to convince someone to let him climb. Johnathan opened his eyes again.

He thought of his home. His girlfriend would awaken and find his side of the bed empty. At first, she might assume he had gone downstairs. Then she would see his shoes. His keys. His wallet. His phone. His hospital badge. Everything a person would take when leaving. Everything except the pajamas.

Would the e-reader still be lying on the bed? Would his body be there? That thought entered quietly and refused to leave. Perhaps he had died.

An arrhythmia in his sleep. A sudden cardiac event. A stroke. An aneurysm. His body might be lying beneath the blankets while something else, some part of him that should have ended, had awakened here. Johnathan pressed two fingers against his neck again. Nothing.

He wondered whether the woman he loved was calling emergency services at that very moment.

Whether paramedics were entering the bedroom. Whether someone was checking a pulse that no longer existed. He lowered his hand.

"I am sorry."

He did not know whom he was speaking to. The castle wall gave no answer. For most of his life, Johnathan had treated stories as places people visited. You opened the book. You entered. You closed it. You returned home.

The people inside waited exactly where you left them. Their suffering could be paused. Their deaths could be undone by turning backward through the pages. Now he understood the

cruelty of that idea. If this place was real, then no page controlled it. Ned Stark's death had not been a shocking chapter ending. It had been a man dying far from his children. The Red Wedding had not been a plot twist. It had been bodies on a floor, a mother's terror, and a boy realizing too late that every courtesy around him had been false.

Sansa's captivity had lasted through nights no reader witnessed. Arya's hunger had hurt even between chapters. Jon's loneliness had existed when no one was reading his name. Johnathan remembered enjoying the uncertainty. The theories. The arguments. The surprises. He felt ashamed. Then angry at himself for feeling ashamed of something he could not have known. He looked toward the wall.

They were alive now. That was what mattered. And if he truly knew what was coming, he had a responsibility to act. A physician did not ignore a diagnosis because the patient did not yet feel sick. But this was not medicine. A warning could become the cause of the disaster it was meant to prevent. Telling Ned about Jon might place Jon in greater danger.

Accusing the queen without proof might begin a war sooner. Saving Bran could change Jaime and Cersei's decisions in ways Johnathan could not predict. Preventing one death might create ten others. He knew the story that happened without him. He knew nothing about the story that would happen because of him. Johnathan leaned his head back against the warm stone.

"First, survive the morning."

That seemed manageable. He would wait until full daylight. Then he would approach the gate openly. He would keep his hands visible. He would say his name. He would ask to speak with the maester. He would not mention other worlds.

He would not mention books. He would definitely not begin with accusations of royal incest and murder. He needed a plausible origin. Across the narrow sea, perhaps. A traveler from a distant land. Shipwrecked near White Harbor. That still did not

explain the clothing, bare feet, pale skin, lack of cold, or ability to disappear.

Johnathan looked down at himself. His body remained partially translucent. The stone behind him showed faintly through his knees. He relaxed his concentration. Color returned. The change was slow, like frost forming in reverse. His hands became opaque. The dragons settled against solid cloth again. He was still learning.

The thought should have been exciting. Instead, it terrified him. Power without understanding was another form of illness. One that could harm everyone nearby. Johnathan drew his knees toward his chest. He did not feel physically tired. His mind was another matter. Fear, disbelief, homesickness, and the effort of maintaining control had left his thoughts frayed. He closed his eyes for a moment.

Only a moment. He could not sleep out here. He needed to remain hidden. Johnathan focused again on becoming difficult to see. His body faded against the stone. The grey wall became visible through him. The red-and-black pajamas dulled until they resembled stains beneath water. He listened to the life within Winterfell.

The sounds became strangely comforting. Wooden wheels crossed stone. A gate opened somewhere farther along the wall. A man cursed at a stubborn horse. Dogs barked and settled. Morning spread slowly across the snow. Johnathan's thoughts drifted.

He saw the bedroom again. The lamp. The e-reader. The sleeping woman beside him. He imagined opening his eyes and discovering that none of this had happened. The idea became so vivid that he allowed himself to believe it. His concentration loosened.

The transparency vanished. Johnathan Harrow became solid beneath the walls of Winterfell. He slept without breathing. Without a heartbeat. Without dreaming. A dog began barking. Johnathan did not wake at first.

The sound moved closer. The barking became frantic, broken by growls and the scrape of claws against frozen ground. A man's voice called for the animal to be still. Another answered from somewhere near the gate. Johnathan opened his eyes. A dog's face filled his vision. Its teeth were bared inches from his nose. Spittle clung to its lips. A heavy chain pulled tight against its collar as it strained toward him. Johnathan jerked backward. The back of his head struck the wall. He felt the impact. No pain followed.

"Don't move."

A spearpoint hovered above his throat. Johnathan froze. Two men stood over him. Both wore mail beneath thick grey cloaks. One held the spear in both hands. The other struggled to control the dog, which twisted and snarled as if desperate to escape and attack him at the same time. The men looked young. Younger than Johnathan had expected armed guards to be. Their faces were red from the cold. Frost clung to their beards. The direwolf badge of House Stark had been fastened to one man's cloak.

The spearman stared at Johnathan's clothing. His eyes moved across the repeated dragons.

"Get up."

Johnathan slowly raised both hands.

"I'm not armed."

The guards exchanged a glance. His accent meant nothing to him, but it clearly meant something to them.

"Who are you?" the man with the dog demanded.

"My name is Johnathan."

"Johnathan what?"

"Harrow."

"From where?"

Johnathan hesitated. The spearpoint moved closer.

"Ohio."

Both men stared. The dog continued growling.

"I don't know where I am," Johnathan added. The spearman's expression hardened.

"You are beneath the walls of Winterfell."

Hearing it confirmed was worse than recognizing it. Johnathan glanced toward the gate. The guard noticed.

"Look at me."

Johnathan obeyed. The second man pulled the dog back another step. His attention had settled on the three-headed dragons.

"Those are Targaryen colors."

"They're pajamas."

"What?"

"Sleeping clothes."

The spearman looked down at Johnathan's bare feet.

"You crossed the north in sleeping clothes."

"I woke up in the forest."

"From what holdfast?"

"I don't know."

"Who sent you?"

"No one."

The guard holding the dog looked toward the gate.

"We should call Captain Cassel."

The spearman did not lower his weapon.

"Not yet."

Johnathan tried to keep his voice calm.

"I understand how this looks."

"Do you?"

"Probably not completely."

The spearman stepped closer. The dog whined and retreated despite the tension on its chain. Johnathan kept his hands raised.

"I don't want to hurt anyone."

The guard almost laughed.

"You?"

He looked Johnathan over from head to toe. Bare feet. Thin pajamas. No sword. No armor. A body that appeared lean rather than threatening. Then the man's expression changed.

He had noticed the snow. Johnathan had been lying there for hours. Yet the snow beneath his body had barely melted. There was no wetness on the stone. No steam rising from his clothing. The spearman looked at Johnathan's face more carefully.

"Why aren't you shivering?"

Johnathan had no safe answer.

"I don't know."

The guard reached down and seized his wrist. His fingers closed around Johnathan's skin. The man recoiled with a curse. Johnathan pulled back instinctively.

"Gods!"

"What?"

"He's cold."

The spearman tightened his grip on the weapon.

"Of course he's cold. He's been sleeping in the snow."

"No."

The other guard stared at his own hand.

"Cold as stone."

Johnathan rose slowly. The spear followed him.

"Please. I can explain."

He could not. He knew that as soon as the words left his mouth. The guard grabbed his arm again, perhaps to restrain him, perhaps to prove what he had felt. Fear moved through Johnathan. The same helpless terror he had felt when the wolf lunged. His arm faded. The guard's fingers sank through Johnathan's wrist.

For one heartbeat, flesh and mail occupied the same space. The man's hand emerged through the other side. He screamed and stumbled backward. Johnathan's arm became solid again. Both guards saw it. The spearman dropped the point of his weapon and drew his sword instead. The dog flattened itself against the snow, whining.

"What are you?"

Johnathan stared at his own hand.

"I don't know."

The guard with the dog recovered and shouted toward the gate.

"Men to the wall! Raise the alarm!"

Metal scraped beyond the gate. Voices answered. Johnathan looked toward the forest. He could run. Perhaps he could disappear. Perhaps the guards could not hold him if he allowed them to pass through his body. But fleeing would confirm everything they feared.

A spy might run. A sorcerer might vanish. A creature of the dead might attack. Johnathan forced himself to remain where he was. He concentrated on solidity. On weight. On being seen.

More guards appeared through the gate, carrying spears, swords, and shields marked with the direwolf. Johnathan raised both hands higher.

"I surrender."

The first spearman circled behind him. A hand closed around one shoulder. Another seized his arm. Someone searched his clothing and found no weapon. A length of rope was brought forward. Johnathan did not resist as they bound his wrists. The men kept their distance wherever possible. They stared at his skin. His eyes.

The dragons covering his pajamas. Johnathan looked up at Winterfell's walls. Steam moved above them in the morning light. Somewhere inside waited the family he had promised himself he would save. He had imagined entering Winterfell as a warning from another world. Instead, he would enter barefoot, bound, and accused of sorcery. The guards pulled him to his feet.

The three-headed dragons stood out like fresh blood against the snow. One man looked at the other.

"What in the seven hells have we found?"

CHAPTER 2

THE LONG FACE OF JUSTICE

The alarm brought half a dozen armed men through the Hunter's Gate. Johnathan remained where the first guards had placed him, standing barefoot in the snow with his wrists bound before him. A spearpoint hovered close to his chest. Another waited near his back. The dog had withdrawn as far as its chain allowed. It crouched behind one of the guards with its ears flattened, whining whenever Johnathan moved. The two men who had discovered him kept glancing at his hands. They had seen his arm fade. They had seen fingers pass through what should have been solid flesh.

Neither appeared eager to touch him again. Johnathan could not blame them. He was not eager to touch himself either. The newcomers approached quickly. Mail shifted beneath heavy cloaks. Sword belts creaked. Boots crushed the morning snow into the mud beneath it. A dark-haired man led them. He appeared to be in his early thirties, though life in the North had already placed lines around his eyes. His cloak was fastened at one shoulder with the grey direwolf of House Stark. A sword hung at his hip, and the men behind him watched for his commands.

Johnathan recognized him. Jory Cassel. Captain of Eddard Stark's household guard. Johnathan knew how Jory would die. A Lannister spear would tear through his eye outside a brothel in King's Landing. The memory arrived before Johnathan could stop it. Not a memory, he corrected himself.

A scene. Words in a book. Except Jory Cassel was walking toward him now, alive and breathing, one hand resting near his sword. Johnathan had read about this man's death while lying comfortably in bed. Jory had not died yet. Perhaps he did not

have to. The thought struck Johnathan with enough force that he almost stepped backward.

The spearman behind him reacted at once.

“Stand still.”

Johnathan froze. Jory stopped several feet away and examined the scene. His gaze moved from the frightened dog to the loose circle of armed men. Then it settled on Johnathan. Bare feet. Unnaturally pale skin. Black and red sleeping clothes covered with the three-headed dragon. Bound wrists.

Jory’s expression hardened.

“What happened here?”

The guard holding the spear swallowed.

“We found him asleep beneath the wall, Captain.”

Jory looked toward the place where Johnathan had been resting.

“A sleeper beneath Winterfell requires this many spears?”

“He is no common sleeper.”

“What is he?”

The guard hesitated.

“I do not know.”

Another guard stepped forward. The man had broad shoulders, a thick brown beard, and fear burning behind his eyes. Johnathan had heard the others call him Alyn.

“His arm disappeared,” Alyn said. “Not all of it. From the wrist nearly to the elbow. My hand passed through him.”

Jory looked at Johnathan’s arm. It appeared solid now.

“You saw this?”

“I felt it.”

The first guard nodded.

“We both saw it.”

Alyn pointed toward the rope around Johnathan’s wrists.

“The rope passed through his flesh as well. For a moment, there was nothing there but mist.”

Johnathan looked down. The rough fibers lay against his pale skin. He could feel their weight, but not their bite. Jory's eyes settled on the three-headed dragons.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Johnathan Harrow."

His own voice sounded strange inside the stone passage. Not because of his accent. Because it belonged to another world.

"From what house?"

"No house."

"Every man has a house, even if it is a poor one."

"Not where I come from."

Jory's gaze remained steady.

"And where is that?"

"Ohio."

Alyn made a dismissive sound.

"A false name for a false place."

"It's real."

"I have never heard of it."

Johnathan looked at him.

"I had never heard of Winterfell as a real place until this morning."

The guards shifted. Jory did not.

"You know where you are."

"I know now."

"And you wear the dragon of House Targaryen."

"They're pajamas."

Jory frowned.

"What?"

"Sleeping clothes."

"You crossed the North dressed for bed?"

"I didn't cross it. I woke in the forest."

"You expect us to believe that?"

"No," Johnathan admitted. "I'm having trouble believing it myself."

Jory studied him in silence. Johnathan tried to remain calm beneath the examination. He had spent years reading faces in hospital rooms. Fear often appeared as anger. Confusion could become suspicion. People reached for whatever explanation made them feel less helpless. To these men, Johnathan was impossible. Impossible things became monsters very quickly. Jory moved closer.

“Were you sent by Viserys Targaryen?”

“No.”

“By his sister?”

“No.”

“Do you serve any lord across the narrow sea?”

“I don’t serve a lord.”

Alyn laughed.

“Then he is a liar as well as a sorcerer.”

Johnathan looked toward him.

“I’m not a sorcerer.”

“I watched your flesh vanish.”

“So did I.”

That answer unsettled Alyn more than denial would have. Jory stopped directly before Johnathan.

“Do you carry any weapon?”

The guards answered before Johnathan could.

“None.”

“Not even a knife,” another man added. Jory reached for the front of Johnathan’s pajama shirt and pinched the fabric between his fingers. He inspected the repeated dragon symbols. The cloth was black, with red piping along the edges. The dragons were bright against it. Each sigil was almost identical to the next.

“These marks are too alike,” Jory observed.

“They were printed.”

“With what?”

“A machine.”

The word meant nothing to them. Jory released the fabric. Johnathan looked past him toward the inner gate. Beyond that

passage waited Winterfell. The real Winterfell. He could hear activity on the other side. Horses. Wheels. Men calling to one another. Metal striking metal somewhere in the distance. Jory turned toward his guards.

“Bring him inside.”

Alyn stared at him.

“Captain?”

“He will be questioned.”

“He is some dead thing.”

“Dead things do not surrender.”

“They do not speak either.”

Johnathan looked at the pale clouds above the wall. He had no heartbeat. He did not breathe unless he remembered to do it. Perhaps Alyn’s answer was closer to the truth than Jory’s. Jory stepped behind Johnathan and took hold of his left arm. The captain’s fingers tightened through the thin fabric. His grip was firm, but controlled.

Alyn seized Johnathan’s right arm. The other men formed a loose ring around them. Two held spears ready. Another followed with his sword drawn. The dog refused to move. Alyn pulled its chain with one hand. The animal dug all four paws into the snow and whined.

“What is wrong with you?”

The dog stared at Johnathan. Its lips pulled back from its teeth. Jory noticed.

“Leave the hound.”

A guard took the chain. The animal immediately retreated. Johnathan glanced at it over his shoulder. Animals knew. The wolf in the forest had known. This dog knew. He wondered whether the direwolves would know too.

The thought brought Bran Stark back into his mind. A seven-year-old boy climbing the walls. A window in a broken tower. A golden man placing one hand against the child’s chest. The fall. Johnathan had imagined stopping it countless times while reading. Now it had not happened yet.

At least, he hoped it had not.

“Move,” Alyn ordered. Johnathan obeyed. They took several steps toward the gate. The rope around his wrists tightened. Then it loosened. Johnathan looked down. The fibers had begun to sink into his left wrist. They did not cut his skin. They passed into it. The rope disappeared beneath the surface of his hand as though lowered into cloudy water. Johnathan stopped. Jory felt the sudden resistance and turned.

“What is it?”

The rope slid free of Johnathan’s left hand. It dropped from his wrist without being untied. Everyone saw it. Alyn released Johnathan’s arm with a curse.

“He’s doing it again.”

Johnathan raised both hands.

“I didn’t mean to.”

“Hold him.”

The spearmen moved closer. Johnathan concentrated on his fingers. On weight. On bone. On being solid. His skin flickered. For one heartbeat, the dark stone of the wall appeared through his palm. Then the hand returned.

“I don’t know how I’m doing it,” Johnathan said. Alyn drew his sword.

“Liar.”

Jory stepped between them.

“Put it away.”

“He can walk through the walls.”

“We do not know that.”

“You want to wait until he is standing over Lord Stark’s children?”

Johnathan’s eyes moved toward him.

“I would never hurt them.”

Alyn’s fear twisted into fury.

“You know of Lord Stark’s children?”

“Everyone in the North knows Lord Stark has children,” Jory said before Johnathan could answer. Alyn continued staring at

him. Johnathan forced himself not to look toward Winterfell's towers. He had nearly made another mistake. Jory took the rope and bound his wrists again. This time he tied it himself, making the knot firm but not cruel.

"You will remain solid."

"I'll try."

"Try harder."

Jory took hold of Johnathan's arm again. Alyn hesitated before doing the same. Johnathan walked forward willingly. The men remained tense around him. They passed beneath the first raised gate. The entrance tunnel swallowed them. The walls were made from immense blocks of dark stone, each worn by centuries of cold, rain, and war. Murder holes opened above. Heavy wooden gates waited at both ends, reinforced with iron bands and spikes.

Boots and wagon wheels had carved shallow channels into the floor. Johnathan stared upward. The gatehouse had not been designed to look impressive. It had been designed to kill people. Attackers trapped inside could be struck from above, behind, and ahead. Boiling water, stones, arrows, and spears could rain down through the openings. Every detail had a purpose. Every stone had survived longer than entire nations from Johnathan's world.

Alyn tightened his grip.

"Stop looking around."

"I've never seen anything like this."

"You said you knew Winterfell."

"I knew of it."

"What difference is there?"

Johnathan looked toward the light ahead.

"All the difference in the world."

They dragged him through the last stretch of the tunnel. Johnathan's heels struck the stone several times when Alyn pulled faster than he could step. The impact sent dull vibrations through his legs. There was still no pain. He felt the pressure of Jory's fingers on one arm and Alyn's on the other. He felt the rope around his wrists. He felt his bare feet sliding across frozen

gravel. But each sensation was muted. Distant. As though his entire body had been wrapped in a thick winter coat.

He did not struggle. Alyn interpreted his silence differently.

“Stop fighting us, you sorcerous rat.”

“I’m not fighting.”

“You keep dragging your feet.”

“I’m trying to understand what I can feel.”

Alyn looked at him as if he had confessed to something obscene.

“What?”

“Never mind.”

Alyn pulled harder. Johnathan’s heel struck the stone. His body lurched. The guard cursed.

“Crazy cunt.”

Jory looked over.

“Enough.”

“He is mocking us.”

“I’m not.”

Alyn released Johnathan’s arm. For an instant, Johnathan thought the guard had obeyed. Then Alyn drew back his leg. The boot struck Johnathan squarely in the ribs. There was a heavy thud. Johnathan’s body lifted sideways. His bound hands prevented him from catching himself. He struck the frozen ground shoulder first. The side of his face hit next.

The world tilted. Alyn had kicked him hard enough to break bone. Johnathan knew that immediately. He had treated similar injuries. Cracked ribs. Bruised lungs. Internal bleeding. A hard enough blow could rupture the spleen or liver. A fall against stone could fracture the skull. He waited for pain. Nothing came. There was pressure where the boot had connected.

A distant vibration along his ribs. His body provided the information without the suffering that should have followed it. Johnathan remained on the ground for several seconds. He listened for his own heartbeat. There was none. He listened for ragged breathing. There was none.

He did not need to catch his breath because the blow had not taken it from him. Jory seized Alyn by the shoulder and turned him around.

“What did I tell you?”

“He was resisting.”

“He was walking.”

“He is a demon.”

“He was bound and surrounded.”

Alyn pointed down at Johnathan.

“Look at him.”

Johnathan pushed himself upright. Snow and dirt clung to his pajama sleeve. He looked down at the place Alyn’s boot had struck. No blood. No torn cloth. No swelling. Johnathan pressed his fingers against his ribs. He felt their shape beneath the skin.

Nothing seemed broken. Alyn stepped backward. Johnathan looked up at him.

“That didn’t really do anything.”

His voice remained steady. Too steady. Alyn’s face went pale.

“Did you see that?”

Every guard had. Jory released him. Alyn pointed at Johnathan with a trembling hand.

“I near broke his fucking ribs, and he didn’t even blink.”

Johnathan rose to his knees. Jory moved to help him. Johnathan accepted the captain’s hand, though he did not need it. He stood without difficulty. Alyn stared at Johnathan’s unmarked side.

“He is a demon. A demon in Targaryen clothes.”

“Keep your tongue,” Jory warned.

“You felt him. Cold as a corpse.”

Jory’s expression remained controlled, but his eyes betrayed him. He was afraid too. Johnathan could not blame him. Jory looked at the guards.

“No one strikes him again without Lord Stark’s command.”

Alyn stared in disbelief.

“You want to bring that inside?”

“Demon or man, he goes to the cells.”

Jory turned toward Johnathan.

“Lord Eddard will decide what is to be done with you.”

Johnathan glanced at the gates behind them. He could attempt to flee. He might be able to make himself transparent again. Perhaps the guards could not hold him. Perhaps he could pass through the outer wall and disappear into the forest. Or perhaps he would become solid while halfway through the stone. The thought ended any desire to experiment. More importantly, Eddard Stark was inside. Bran was inside.

Jon. Arya. Sansa. Robb. Rickon. Johnathan had spent years wishing someone could warn them. Now he was the warning.

“I’ll come willingly,” he said. Jory gave him a hard look.

“You were already coming.”

“I wanted to make it clear.”

“Nothing about you is clear.”

Jory took his arm again. They crossed into Winterfell. The world opened around Johnathan. The outer ward was enormous. It spread between the two defensive walls like a settlement of its own. Stables, workshops, storehouses, barracks, sheds, and low stone buildings filled the space. Covered walkways connected some of them. Wagons rolled through muddy lanes. Horses stamped and snorted while grooms hauled feed from wooden carts. Men-at-arms crossed the yard in mail and heavy cloaks. Servants carried baskets, tools, firewood, sacks of grain, and steaming buckets.

Dogs moved between buildings. Chickens scattered beneath the wheels of a cart. Smoke climbed from dozens of chimneys. Steam escaped from channels near the walls and drifted through the cold air in pale ribbons. The smell struck Johnathan first. Woodsmoke. Horse dung.

Wet leather. Dogs. Iron. Fresh bread. Boiled meat. Old stone. And beneath it all, the strange mineral scent of the hot springs.

Winterfell did not smell like a fantasy. It smelled like people. Hundreds of people living, working, eating, arguing, sweating,

and sleeping behind ancient walls. Johnathan slowed. The guards pulled him onward. The castle was far larger inside than he had imagined. Not a single keep surrounded by a decorative courtyard.

Not the carefully framed collection of buildings he had seen on television. Winterfell was a fortified city. The inner wall towered ahead, darker and higher than the outer defenses. Beyond it rose towers of different shapes and ages. Some were round. Others square. One leaned slightly beneath the burden of centuries. The Great Keep rose above the center of the castle. The First Keep stood farther away, ancient and round, with gargoyles crouched along its stone. Steam drifted between the buildings. Johnathan saw a distant roof made from dark glass.

The glass gardens. Plants would be growing inside despite the snow. Fruits and vegetables preserved by heat flowing through Winterfell's walls. He had read the description. Knowing did not prepare him for seeing it. The place was ancient. Not painted to look old. Not distressed by artists.

Actually ancient. Stones had cracked and been repaired. Towers had been added by generations of Stark lords. Rooflines overlapped in ways no architect would design from the beginning. Different centuries pressed against each other. Winterfell felt less like a building than a living creature that had grown around its inhabitants. Johnathan stared upward. A shadow passed over him. Ravens circled one of the towers. He watched them disappear into the grey morning sky.

A woman carrying folded wool stopped when she saw him. Her eyes went to the dragons on his clothes. Then to his bare feet. Her face tightened. She whispered something to the boy beside her. The boy stared openly. More people noticed.

Work slowed. Hammering stopped beneath one of the sheds. A groom holding a horse's reins turned to look. Whispers moved through the ward.

"Targaryen."

"A dragon man."

“Where are his boots?”

“They found him outside.”

“Look at his face.”

“Is he dead?”

Johnathan lowered his head. The pajamas had been a Christmas joke. A gift from someone who loved him. Now they might get him executed. A small hand had sewn nothing on them. No Westerosi dyer had touched the cloth. The dragon was not a pledge in Johnathan’s world. Here, it was blood. The Mad King had worn that sigil.

Rhaegar Targaryen had worn it. Men had marched beneath it while Ned Stark’s father burned alive. Johnathan felt the weight of every red dragon covering him. Jory noticed the crowd.

“Move along,” he ordered. The servants obeyed. The whispers did not stop. A guard hurried from a nearby building with a rough grey cloak. Jory took it and draped it over Johnathan’s shoulders. The heavy wool covered most of the pajamas. Johnathan did not feel warmer. He had not felt cold without it. Alyn saw his expression.

“You should be grateful.”

“I am.”

“You do not look it.”

“I’m still trying to understand where I am.”

“You are in Winterfell.”

Johnathan looked toward the Great Keep.

“I know.”

Jory heard him. The captain’s grip tightened slightly.

“You speak that name as though it means more to you than it should.”

Johnathan did not answer. A horn sounded behind them. The noise rolled through the gatehouse and across the ward. Men began clearing the central path. Stable hands hurried toward the Hunter’s Gate. A second horn followed. Jory looked back.

“Lord Stark has returned.”

Johnathan stopped breathing. Not because the words startled him. Because he had forgotten to continue. The gate opened wider. Mounted men began entering Winterfell. They wore grey and white cloaks darkened by snow. The direwolf of House Stark flew from a standard above them. Johnathan recognized the moment.

The execution. The ride back. The direwolf pups. His gaze searched the riders. The first boy he recognized had reddish-brown hair and broad shoulders for his age. Robb Stark. Fourteen years old. Not a young man. A boy on the edge of becoming one. He rode with confidence, though excitement shone through his attempts to appear solemn. Something moved beneath his cloak. A grey-black head appeared for a moment. Grey Wind. Johnathan's eyes moved to the rider beside him. Jon Snow.

Long face. Dark hair. Grey eyes so deep they almost appeared black. He looked more like Ned than any of the trueborn Stark children, though no one around him seemed willing to understand what that might mean. Jon held a white bundle against his chest. Ghost raised his head. The direwolf pup's eyes were open. Red eyes fixed on Johnathan. The animal became perfectly still. Jon looked down at Ghost. Then he followed the pup's stare. His gaze found Johnathan. For one long moment, the prisoner from Ohio and the boy raised as Ned Stark's bastard looked at one another across Winterfell's yard. Johnathan knew who Jon's mother was.

He knew who his father was. He knew the name Jon had been born to carry, or at least the name another telling of the story had given him. He knew Jon would take the black. He knew Jon would rise at the Wall. He knew knives would enter his body while men called him traitor. Jon knew nothing of Johnathan. Only that a pale stranger stood barefoot in the snow wearing Targaryen dragons beneath a grey cloak.

Johnathan looked away. Too late. Jon had noticed the dragons. Theon Greyjoy rode behind them. He was nineteen, lean and

handsome, with dark hair and the easy arrogance of someone who used laughter to conceal every wound. Johnathan knew his future too. Winterfell captured.

Bran and Rickon falsely murdered. Reek. Flayed fingers. A name stripped away one piece at a time. Johnathan had never liked Theon when first reading the books. Seeing him alive made hatred more difficult. The next rider was smaller.

Bran Stark sat on his pony with a bundle tucked inside his leathers. Seven years old. His face was still bright from the morning's excitement. He looked nervous and pleased with himself at the same time, as though witnessing the execution had made him feel older. A small grey head pushed through the opening of his cloak. Summer. Johnathan stared. Bran was alive.

Whole. His legs rested naturally against the pony. His hands held the reins. He had not fallen. Not yet. Johnathan nearly called his name. The warning burned inside him.

Stay away from the broken tower. Do not climb when the king comes. Do not follow Jaime and Cersei. Do not look through that window. Johnathan forced his mouth shut. Bran had never seen him before. Calling to him would sound like a threat.

The guards would drag Johnathan away. Ned might have him executed before he could explain. He watched Bran ride past. The boy looked toward him. Their eyes met. Bran slowed his pony slightly. Theon said something Johnathan could not hear.

Bran turned forward again. The riders continued deeper into the castle. Johnathan looked among them for one final figure. Eddard Stark rode near the rear of the party. He wore a heavy grey cloak trimmed in white fur. His brown hair had begun to recede from a high forehead, and his close-cut beard was touched with grey. His face was long. Solemn.

There was little warmth in it that morning. Johnathan knew why. Ned had passed judgment at dawn. He had looked into Gared's terrified eyes. He had listened to the deserter's final words. Then he had taken up Ice and removed the man's head

with one stroke. The greatsword traveled with the party, wrapped and secured near Ned's saddle.

Even covered, it looked immense. Valyrian steel. Dark as smoke. A weapon made before the Doom.

Johnathan stared at it and wondered whether it could cut him. The question chilled something inside him, though the cold air could not. Ned's horse passed through the inner gate.

Jory pulled Johnathan onward. The party disappeared ahead of them.

"Do you know Lord Stark?" Jory asked.

"No."

"You looked upon him as though you did."

"I've heard of him."

"Where?"

Johnathan hesitated. The truth was too dangerous. The lie came slowly.

"From stories."

Jory looked toward him.

"What stories?"

"Stories about the rebellion."

That answer was plausible. Too plausible to challenge immediately. Jory continued walking. Johnathan glanced once more toward the place Bran had vanished. He had arrived on the exact day. The day the direwolves were found. The day Gared died.

That meant Jon Arryn was either already dead or about to die in King's Landing. Robert would come north. The castle would fill with Lannisters. Bran would climb. The story was moving. It did not care whether Johnathan was ready. They passed through the inner gate.

The heart of Winterfell rose around him. The noise became louder here. Men carried the morning's supplies toward storehouses. Servants crossed between the kitchens and the halls. A blacksmith's hammer rang steadily from a nearby forge. Children's voices echoed from somewhere beyond a wall.

Johnathan looked toward the Great Keep. Its stone steps rose to a pair of heavy wooden doors. Men-at-arms stood on either side. Jory guided Johnathan toward them.

Alyn still held his right arm, though the guard touched him as little as possible. The doors opened. Warm air flowed from within, carrying the smell of smoke, rushes, cooked grain, and damp wool.

Johnathan expected to be taken inside. Instead, movement appeared at the top of the steps. A man emerged from the Great Keep. Eddard Stark had removed his riding gloves. A servant followed several paces behind him, carrying the long sword belt he had worn on the road.

Ned descended slowly. Johnathan's mind tried to compare him with the television actor. The comparison failed almost immediately. This man was younger. His face was longer and more severe. His brown hair had begun to thin, but he was not old. His grey eyes were colder than Johnathan remembered from any adaptation. He looked like a northern lord who had been forced to grow hard without becoming cruel. He looked like the man from the book.

The real one. Johnathan felt suddenly exposed. Ned stopped halfway down the steps. His eyes went first to Jory. Then to Alyn. Then to the prisoner between them. His gaze traveled over Johnathan's bare feet. The loose grey cloak. The glimpse of black cloth beneath it.

A wind caught one edge of the cloak. The fabric opened. The three-headed dragons became visible. Ned's expression changed. Only slightly. His eyes became harder.

"Lord Eddard," Jory said. He released Johnathan's arm and bowed his head. Ned descended the remaining steps.

"What is this?"

"We found him outside the Hunter's Gate."

"Alone?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Armed?"

“No.”

Ned looked at Johnathan. The scrutiny felt heavier than the spears. Jory continued.

“He was asleep beneath the wall. Barefoot. Dressed as you see him.”

Ned’s eyes settled on the dragon sigils.

“Why is he bound?”

Jory hesitated. Alyn answered.

“He turned to mist, my lord.”

Ned looked toward him. Alyn swallowed.

“His arm did. I caught hold of him, and my hand passed through the flesh. The rope went through him too.”

Ned’s attention returned to Johnathan.

“Is this true?”

“I don’t know what happened.”

“That was not my question.”

Johnathan looked down.

“Yes.”

“You became mist.”

“Partly.”

“By choice?”

“No.”

Alyn made a dismissive sound. Ned glanced at him. The guard lowered his eyes. Jory continued.

“Alyn struck him.”

Ned’s face hardened.

“Why?”

“I thought he was escaping,” Alyn said.

“Was he?”

“No, my lord.”

“Then you struck a bound man because you were frightened.”

Alyn’s face flushed.

“Yes, my lord.”

“How hard?”

Jory answered.

“Hard enough that I feared he had broken the stranger’s ribs.”

Ned looked at Johnathan.

“And?”

“There is no injury.”

Ned’s grey eyes flickered. Jory lowered his voice.

“He did not gasp. He did not cry out. He said the blow did nothing.”

Alyn pointed at Johnathan.

“He is a demon.”

Ned turned.

“I did not ask what Old Nan might call him.”

Alyn fell silent. Ned approached Johnathan. The closer he came, the more Johnathan understood why people followed him. There was no theatrical rage. No need to shout. Authority settled around him naturally. He looked at the dragons again.

“You are far from home, traveler.”

Johnathan almost laughed from nerves.

“You have no idea.”

“What is your name?”

“Johnathan Harrow.”

“Your house?”

“I don’t have one.”

“All men belong somewhere.”

“I’m from Ohio.”

Ned repeated the word slowly.

“Ohio.”

“It’s a place.”

“I know of no such land.”

“No one here would.”

“Where does it lie?”

Johnathan looked beyond Ned at the ancient doors of the Great Keep. How could he explain Earth?

How could he explain planets, continents, nations, electricity, airplanes, hospitals, and books? How could he explain that

Eddard Stark's life had been printed, sold, translated, adapted, debated, and mourned by millions of strangers?

"Very far away."

"Beyond the narrow sea?"

"Farther."

"East of Asshai?"

"Not exactly."

Ned's eyes narrowed.

"You speak evasively."

"I'm trying not to sound insane."

Alyn laughed under his breath.

"That fight is lost."

Jory looked at him. Alyn stopped. Ned lifted one edge of the grey cloak and examined the clothing beneath.

"You wear the sigil of House Targaryen."

"They're sleeping clothes."

"Whose?"

"Mine."

"Were they given to you by Viserys Targaryen?"

"No."

"His sister?"

"No."

"A loyalist in exile?"

"No."

"Then why do you wear their dragon?"

Johnathan struggled for an answer that would make sense.

"In my home, the sigil does not mean I serve them."

"What does it mean?"

"That I liked the story."

The words escaped before he could stop them. Ned's face changed.

"What story?"

Johnathan's mouth went dry.

"About the Targaryens."

“Your people wear the arms of dead kings because they enjoy tales about them?”

“Sometimes.”

Jory looked at Johnathan as though Ohio had become more disturbing with every answer. Ned studied the repeating sigils.

“The cloth is strange.”

“It was made by a machine.”

“What manner of machine?”

“A complicated one.”

“That answer explains little.”

“I know.”

Ned released the cloak. His gloved hand settled on Johnathan’s shoulder. The contact lasted less than a second. Ned’s fingers tightened. His face remained controlled, but surprise entered his eyes. Johnathan’s skin was colder than the snow around them. Ned pressed his hand more firmly against the shoulder, perhaps testing whether the cold came only from the surface.

Johnathan felt pressure. No warmth passed into him.

“You feel like flesh,” Ned said quietly.

“I think I am.”

Ned looked into his eyes.

“But your skin is cold as stone.”

“I know.”

“You do not shiver.”

“No.”

“Your feet show no sign of frostbite.”

“No.”

“How long were you beneath the wall?”

“I don’t know. Long enough to fall asleep.”

“In the snow.”

“Yes.”

Ned glanced at Jory.

“Did he breathe when you found him?”

Jory looked uncertain.

“I did not think to watch.”

“I can breathe,” Johnathan said. Ned’s gaze returned to him. Johnathan inhaled. His chest expanded because he commanded it to. He exhaled. No mist appeared. Everyone saw. Alyn stepped backward.

Jory’s eyes widened. Ned remained still. Johnathan tried again. Nothing. The air was cold enough that every living person around him breathed pale clouds. Johnathan’s breath remained invisible.

“What are you?” Ned asked. Johnathan looked down at his bare feet.

“I wish I knew.”

“A wight,” Alyn whispered.

“I’m not a wight.”

“You have no breath.”

“I said I don’t understand it.”

“Wights have blue eyes,” Jory said. Alyn looked toward him.

“That is what the stories say.”

Ned did not take his eyes from Johnathan.

“Are you a deserter from the Night’s Watch?”

“No.”

“You wear no black cloak, yet black covers most of you.”

“These are pajamas.”

“A man may call armor a gown. The name does not change what it is.”

“I’ve never been to the Wall.”

“You have the pale look of something that came from beyond it.”

“I woke in the forest.”

“From where did you travel before that?”

“My home.”

“Ohio.”

“Yes.”

Ned studied him for another long moment. Johnathan wanted to tell him everything. The desire pressed against his ribs. Jon Arryn. Cersei. Jaime. The children.

Littlefinger. The broken tower. The Others. The Red Wedding. Every warning crowded his thoughts at once. He remembered how easy it had seemed while lying in bed. Warn Ned.

Protect Bran. Tell Jon the truth. Stop the Starks from going south. Now Ned stood before him as a real man. Not a character waiting for Johnathan's advice. A lord responsible for thousands of lives. A father with children inside these walls.

A judge who had taken a man's head that morning because duty demanded it. Johnathan realized he had no idea how to begin. Ned looked toward Jory.

"Take him to one of the tower cells."

Johnathan's attention snapped back.

"Not the dungeon?"

Ned looked at him.

"You expected worse?"

"I'm wearing Targaryen dragons in Winterfell."

"That is the first sensible thing you have said."

Jory bowed his head.

"The black cells, my lord?"

"No. One of the upper chambers."

Ned looked toward Johnathan's bare feet.

"Give him clothing. Food as well."

Alyn stared.

"Food?"

"He surrendered beneath my walls. He has given no violence."

"He may not need food."

Ned's eyes hardened.

"That is for Maester Luwin to determine."

He turned toward Jory.

"Place two men outside the door. Men who will not strike prisoners to quiet their own fear."

Alyn looked at the ground.

“Yes, my lord,” Jory said.

“Send Luwin to examine him.”

Ned started to turn away. Panic rose in Johnathan. He had come so close. Ned would leave. Robert would arrive. Bran would climb. The future would continue exactly as written while Johnathan sat inside a tower trying to formulate the perfect explanation.

“Lord Stark.”

Ned stopped. Johnathan swallowed. Every guard looked at him. Jory’s grip tightened on his arm.

“Choose your next words carefully,” the captain warned. Johnathan looked at Ned’s back. The grey cloak. The white fur. The man who would be called traitor beneath the shadow of the Iron Throne. He could not let the moment pass.

“A raven is coming from King’s Landing.”

Ned turned slowly. Johnathan continued before courage failed.

“It will carry word of Jon Arryn.”

Ned’s expression changed. The name mattered. Johnathan saw it immediately. Lord Jon Arryn had raised Ned in the Vale. He had become a second father to him. When the Mad King demanded the heads of Ned and Robert, Jon Arryn had raised his banners rather than betray them. Ned stepped toward Johnathan.

“What of Lord Arryn?”

Johnathan’s mouth went dry. He had nearly shouted the old line from the original version of events. Tell Jon Arryn the seed is strong. But that made no sense. If the raven was coming, Jon Arryn was already dead. Johnathan corrected himself.

“The raven will say he is dead.”

Silence swallowed the yard. Even the nearby servants seemed to stop moving. Ned’s face became unreadable.

“You speak of the Hand of the King.”

“Yes.”

“He was alive when last he wrote.”

“I know.”

“You know?”

Johnathan closed his eyes briefly. Another mistake.

“I mean, I know what you believe.”

“Who told you this?”

“No one here.”

“Who?”

Johnathan looked at the guards surrounding him. This was not the place. Too many ears. Too many frightened men.

“I can’t explain it in the yard.”

Ned’s voice grew colder.

“You will explain it wherever I command.”

“Robert Baratheon will come north after the raven.”

Alyn muttered a prayer. Jory stared at Johnathan. Ned took another step closer.

“Why?”

“To ask you to become Hand of the King.”

The words seemed to strike Ned physically. His shoulders tightened beneath the cloak. Johnathan pressed onward.

“If you go south without knowing what Jon Arryn discovered, your house will be torn apart.”

Jory pulled Johnathan backward.

“That is enough.”

Johnathan resisted for the first time. Not violently. Only enough to remain facing Ned.

“His last words were about the truth he found.”

Ned’s grey eyes had become hard as iron.

“What words?”

Johnathan looked directly at him.

“The seed is strong.”

No one moved. The phrase hung between them. Ned stared at Johnathan as though the pale stranger had reached into a locked chamber and taken something from it. Jory’s voice dropped.

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know every step he took,” Johnathan said. “But those words matter.”

Ned glanced toward the Great Keep. Perhaps he expected Maester Luwin to appear with a raven at that very moment. Perhaps part of him already feared the message waiting in the rookery. Johnathan continued.

“Do not go south blind. Do not trust everyone who smiles at you in King’s Landing.”

Ned’s attention snapped back.

“You presume to counsel me?”

“I’m trying to keep you alive.”

Alyn made the sign of the Seven. Jory drew Johnathan farther away. Ned did not stop him. Johnathan raised his voice.

“Lord Stark, please.”

Ned’s expression closed. The lord had made his decision.

“To the tower.”

Johnathan felt the words settle like a sentence. Jory turned him toward the inner yard. The guards began moving. Johnathan looked over his shoulder. Ned remained near the steps of the Great Keep. His long face had become pale beneath the morning light.

“The raven will come,” Johnathan called. “When it does, remember what I said.”

Ned’s hand moved toward the sword at his side. Not drawing it. Resting upon it. A familiar gesture from a man who trusted steel more than prophecy.

“To the cells,” Ned said again. His voice was as cold as Valyrian steel.

“Now.”

Jory pulled Johnathan onward. The people in the yard watched him pass. The grey cloak shifted around his body, revealing flashes of red dragons beneath it. Johnathan stopped trying to control the strange transparency in his skin. He concentrated only on remaining solid. He wanted to see the castle. If he woke in Ohio, he wanted to remember every stone.

They crossed beneath another archway. The inner yard spread ahead. Johnathan saw the Great Keep rising behind him, the armory, the forge, and distant towers steaming beneath the northern sky. The sound of children carried from the practice yard. Wood struck wood. A boy laughed. Johnathan turned his head.

Robb Stark stood beside a wooden fence, Grey Wind tucked beneath one arm. Jon Snow was near him with Ghost. Theon Greyjoy leaned against a post, speaking with one of the guards. Bran knelt in the snow. Summer squirmed in his lap. Bran laughed again as the direwolf pup licked his cheek. Johnathan stared. The boy was safe. For now. Ghost looked toward Johnathan. The white pup rose. Its red eyes followed him across the yard. Jon noticed. He turned as well.

Johnathan and Jon looked at one another for the second time that morning. Jon's gaze moved toward the glimpse of dragon sigils beneath the cloak. His expression sharpened. Johnathan wondered whether Jon felt anything when he saw them. Some buried instinct. Some echo of the blood he did not know he carried. Probably not.

Life was rarely so convenient. Jory tugged Johnathan's arm.

"Keep moving."

Johnathan obeyed. Bran looked up. His eyes followed the strange prisoner. Johnathan wanted to shout. Stay away from the broken tower. Instead, he said nothing. Jory led him toward a narrow stone tower near the inner wall.

The guards opened the door. A spiral stair climbed into darkness. The steps were uneven, worn down by generations of boots. Johnathan began climbing. Jory stayed behind him. Alyn and another guard followed. They climbed one level. Then another.

Johnathan waited for fatigue. None came. His legs did not ache. His breathing did not change. He did not sweat beneath the heavy wool cloak. Jory's breath grew louder behind him. Alyn

began to pant. Johnathan continued at the same pace. Jory noticed.

“You do not tire.”

“Apparently not.”

“You speak of that as if it surprises you.”

“It does.”

“You expect me to believe you learned all these things about yourself this morning?”

“I woke in the snow a few hours ago.”

“From another land.”

“Yes.”

“Wearing the dragon.”

“Yes.”

“With no heartbeat.”

Johnathan looked back.

“I didn’t tell you that.”

Jory stopped. Alyn nearly collided with him. Johnathan realized his mistake.

“I checked for it when I woke.”

“You found none?”

“No.”

The stairway became very quiet. Alyn drew his sword halfway. Jory looked at him.

“Put it away.”

“He admits he is dead.”

“I said I have no heartbeat. I didn’t say I understand why.”

“Dead men have no heartbeat.”

“Dead men usually don’t climb stairs and argue.”

Alyn’s hand remained on his sword. Jory continued upward.

“Maester Luwin will decide.”

Johnathan followed.

“What happens if he decides I’m dead?”

“No maester decides whether a man is dead.”

“In my world, that is exactly who decides.”

Jory looked back again.

“In your world, men need healers to tell them when corpses have stopped moving?”

“Sometimes it’s more complicated than that.”

“You make Ohio sound like a land of fools.”

Johnathan almost smiled.

“Some days it is.”

They reached the upper floor. A heavy door stood at the end of a short passage. Iron bands reinforced the dark wood. A small viewing slit had been cut near the center. Jory unlocked it. The room beyond was not a dungeon. It had a narrow bed, a wooden table, a chair, a chamber pot, and a small hearth. The fire had not been lit. One barred window overlooked the inner ward. Johnathan stepped inside. The room smelled of dust, cold stone, and old straw.

Jory removed the rope from his wrists. The skin beneath remained smooth. No marks. No redness. Jory saw. He rubbed one thumb across the place the rope had been. Johnathan felt the pressure.

The captain’s skin was warm. Johnathan’s was not. Jory pulled his hand away.

“Cold as the dead.”

“So everyone keeps telling me.”

The captain moved toward the door.

“You will remain here.”

“I said I would.”

“If you turn to mist and pass through the wall, the archers will be waiting below.”

“I don’t know if I can pass through walls.”

“Do not learn here.”

“Agreed.”

Alyn stood in the doorway. His face had not recovered its color.

“He should be in the crypts.”

Johnathan turned sharply.

“No.”

Alyn smiled without humor.

"The dead belong with the dead."

"I'm not going beneath the ground."

The force in Johnathan's voice surprised everyone, including himself. The crypts of Winterfell waited beneath the castle. Dark halls lined with stone kings. Iron swords laid across their laps. Dead direwolves at their feet. He did not intend to discover the answer while locked underground. Jory looked toward Alyn.

"He will remain here."

The guard frowned.

"He threatened Lord Stark."

"I warned him."

Alyn looked at Johnathan.

"The difference may be lost when Ice meets your neck."

Johnathan thought of the greatsword. Dark ripples in Valyrian steel. An edge sharp enough to remove a man's head in a single stroke. He touched his throat. A wolf had passed through him. A kick had not injured him. That did not mean Ice would fail.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

Jory stepped into the passage.

"Food will be brought."

"I don't feel hungry."

"You will eat anyway."

"Why?"

"Because men eat. Until Maester Luwin decides otherwise, you will behave like one."

That logic was difficult to challenge. Jory began closing the door.

"Captain."

He paused. Johnathan looked past him toward the stairwell.

"Jon Arryn is dead."

Jory's expression hardened.

"You have said enough."

"I'm not trying to frighten anyone."

"You failed."

“I need Lord Stark to listen.”

“Then you should have spoken without riddles.”

“I told him the truth.”

Jory looked at him for a long moment.

“Truth has proof.”

“The raven will be the proof.”

“And if no raven comes?”

“Then I’m wrong.”

“And what happens to you?”

Johnathan looked down at his hands.

“I don’t know.”

Jory closed the door. The bolt slid into place. Johnathan stood alone. He listened to the guards take their positions outside. Alyn’s voice came through the wood.

“Crazy cunt should have been killed at the gate.”

Jory answered quietly.

“Lord Stark gave an order.”

“You felt his skin.”

“So did Lord Stark.”

“He has no breath.”

“Keep your voice down.”

“He knows things.”

“That is why he lives.”

Their voices faded as they moved farther into the passage. Johnathan crossed to the window. The bars were thick, but the opening gave him a clear view of part of the inner yard. Winterfell moved beneath him. Men carried wood toward the Great Keep. Servants crossed between buildings. Horses were led into the stables. Steam rose from the hot pools in pale clouds. The Stark children remained in the yard. Robb held Grey Wind.

Jon knelt beside Ghost. Theon stood nearby, laughing at something. Bran was chasing Summer through the snow. Johnathan pressed both hands against the bars. They were real. All of them. He thought of the passage he had been reading before falling asleep.

The tragedy had not started yet. Or perhaps it had, and none of them knew it. Characters in a book lived scripted lives, Johnathan had thought. Their choices, suffering, and deaths had been decided by a man in another world. A man who had not even finished writing their story. Readers had waited fifteen years for the next book, and still there was nothing. Perhaps Martin would never finish it. The older a person became, the more time lay behind them, until one day there was far less waiting ahead. Johnathan had once found dark humor in that thought.

There was nothing amusing about it now. What happened to unfinished characters? Did they remain trapped between one published page and the next? Did their lives continue where the author had stopped? Did this world possess its own future, or was it waiting for someone on Earth to decide how it ended? Johnathan watched Bran stumble in the snow. Summer leapt upon him.

The boy laughed and wrapped both arms around the direwolf pup. He did not look scripted. He looked alive. Johnathan turned from the window. The room felt smaller. He could leave. Perhaps.

He placed one hand against the stone wall. It felt rough beneath his palm. He focused on what had happened with the wolf. The feeling of being less substantial. Lighter. Not invisible, exactly. Absent. His fingertips faded. The stone became visible through them. Johnathan pulled his hand away. The fingers returned. He stared. If he concentrated, he might pass through the door. He might walk out of the tower.

He might reach Bran before anyone stopped him. But then what? A pale stranger appearing inside the castle would terrify everyone. Ned would believe him an assassin. The guards would attack. Johnathan might hurt someone without meaning to. He had no idea what he was capable of.

Power without control was not freedom. It was danger. Johnathan returned to the window. Bran and Summer had disappeared from view. The broken tower rose in the distance.

Its upper stones were dark against the pale sky. Johnathan stared at it.

“Stay away from there,” he whispered. A bell sounded somewhere in Winterfell. Moments later, ravens burst from the rookery. They circled the tower in a black cloud. One bird separated from the others and flew toward the Great Keep. Johnathan’s hands tightened around the bars. Perhaps it was nothing. A routine message. A report from one of Ned’s bannermen. A letter from the Wall. Then he saw movement below. A young servant ran from the direction of the rookery. The boy clutched a sealed message in both hands. He hurried toward the Great Keep. Johnathan watched until the doors swallowed him. The raven had arrived. Jon Arryn was dead. Robert was coming north. The story had reached Winterfell. Footsteps sounded in the passage outside Johnathan’s chamber. Alyn muttered something. Jory answered sharply. The bolt remained in place. Johnathan returned to the window. Minutes passed. Then the doors of the Great Keep opened. Eddard Stark emerged. He stood motionless at the top of the stairs. A piece of parchment hung from one hand. Even at a distance, Johnathan could see that something had changed. Ned’s shoulders had lowered. His head bowed. Grief had found him. Johnathan rested his forehead against the cold iron bars. He had been right. The knowledge brought no satisfaction.

Only fear. Ned slowly lifted his head. His eyes turned toward the tower. Toward Johnathan’s window. The distance was too great for either man to see the other clearly. Still, Johnathan felt certain that Ned knew exactly where he was being held. The lord of Winterfell closed his hand around the message. Then he disappeared back inside. Johnathan remained at the window. The seed is strong. The words were inside Winterfell now. So was he. And neither would remain harmless for long.

CHAPTER 3

THE WATCHER IN THE TOWER

The iron-studded door slammed shut behind Johnathan. A heartbeat later, the bolt scraped into place. The sound was heavy and final. Johnathan stood in the middle of the tower cell, wrists still bound, listening as Jory and Alyn moved into the passage outside. Neither man bothered lowering his voice.

"I tell you, Jory, the thing is dead."

"He speaks well enough for a dead man."

"So did the corpses in the old tales."

"You have heard too many old tales."

"I kicked him hard enough to cave in a man's ribs."

"You should not have kicked him at all."

"He was fighting us."

"He was frightened."

"He turned to mist!"

"That part I saw."

A short silence followed. Then Alyn spoke more quietly.

"Shadow-binder, perhaps."

"From Asshai?"

"Where else?"

"He said he came from Ohio."

"What in seven hells is an Ohio?"

Johnathan looked at the closed door.

"Honestly, that is a difficult question even where I come from."

The conversation outside stopped. Alyn muttered something beneath his breath. Jory struck the door once with the heel of his hand.

"Keep quiet in there."

Johnathan looked around the cell.

"I was helping."

“Quiet.”

Johnathan sighed. The guards resumed their discussion farther down the passage. Alyn was now convinced that Ohio was either an island beyond Asshai or the name of a Targaryen sorcerer. Jory remained less certain. That did not appear to make him less afraid. Johnathan lowered himself onto the stone cot. The room was better than the black cells beneath Winterfell would have been.

That was not saying much. The cot consisted of a flat stone shelf covered by a thin straw mattress and one rough blanket. A wooden bucket stood near the wall. A narrow table had been fixed beneath the window. There was no chair. The walls were dark grey stone. The ceiling curved overhead. A small window faced into the castle. Three iron bars crossed the opening. Johnathan rested his bound hands in his lap. For several seconds, he did nothing. Then the reality of the morning struck him all at once. He had awakened in a forest that should not exist. A wolf had passed through his body. Winterfell stood outside the window. He had been arrested while wearing Targaryen pajamas. Then he had spoken to Eddard Stark.

The real Eddard Stark. Not an actor. Not an illustration. Not a voice in an audiobook. A living man. Johnathan slowly leaned forward and pressed both hands over his face.

“I just spoke to Eddard Stark.”

The words sounded absurd inside the cell. He lowered his hands. The room remained. He looked down at the red three-headed dragons patterned across his black clothing. To him, they were novelty pajamas. His girlfriend had bought them as a joke. To the men of Winterfell, they were something else entirely. They were the colors of the dynasty that Robert Baratheon had overthrown. The sigil of the king who had burned Rickard Stark alive. The sigil worn by the family of the prince whose actions had helped begin a war and left Lyanna Stark dead in a tower in Dorne. Johnathan had walked into Ned Stark’s home covered from neck to ankle in reminders of his father and brother’s

murders. And then he had shouted warnings about Robert Baratheon, Jon Arryn, and the phrase the seed is strong. He closed his eyes.

“That could have gone better.”

He had spent years imagining what he would say if he entered this world. In those fantasies, he had always been calm. Precise. Convincing. He would reveal only enough to earn trust. He would provide evidence before accusations. He would avoid frightening anyone.

Instead, he had behaved like a man trying to summarize an entire book while being dragged through the snow. Robert is coming. Do not become Hand. The seed is strong. Johnathan groaned. Ned Stark had every reason to believe he was a spy, a sorcerer, or a lunatic. Possibly all three.

What happened now? Would Ned question him privately? Would Maester Luwin examine him? Would they burn the pajamas? Would they burn him? Johnathan glanced toward the door. The stories said the North remembered.

They also said the North dealt harshly with threats. Ned was honorable. He was not harmless.

Johnathan had read the scene of the deserter’s execution only hours ago. The man who passed the sentence swung the sword. Ned had taught Bran not to look away. Would he make the same choice with Johnathan?

He placed two fingers against his neck. There was still no pulse. His skin remained cold. He inhaled and held the breath out of habit. His body never demanded another. The kick from Alyn had left no pain. Johnathan touched the place beneath his ribs where the boot had struck.

The skin felt smooth. No tenderness. No swelling. No broken bone that he could detect. He had been dragged over frozen gravel without losing skin from his heels. He had slept in snow without freezing. Perhaps Ice could not hurt him.

That possibility should have comforted him. It did not. If Ned struck and the sword passed through him, Johnathan would

become something worse than a prisoner. He would become proof. Proof of sorcery. Proof of the dead walking. Proof that every frightened whisper beyond the Wall might be true.

Men feared what they could not understand. Johnathan was beginning to share their fear. He stood and walked toward the window. The ropes around his wrists made the movement awkward. He rested his hands against the stone beneath the opening and looked outside. Winterfell spread below him. The tower cell overlooked part of the inner ward. Walls, roofs, bridges, yards, stairs, and narrow passages overlapped in ways no television set could have captured. The castle did not possess the clean symmetry of a modern reconstruction.

Winterfell had grown. One century had placed stone beside another. Towers had been repaired, abandoned, rebuilt, and joined by covered walks. Roofs stood at different heights. Some walls leaned slightly. Steam drifted through the yards from the hot springs and curled around the older structures. It looked ancient because it was ancient. Not decorated to appear so. The air carried sounds upward. Hammers struck iron. A saw rasped through timber.

Horses stamped inside the stables. Dogs barked somewhere below. Servants called to one another while carrying baskets, firewood, water, and sacks of grain. A boy ran across the yard with a chicken beneath one arm. The chicken objected loudly. Johnathan almost laughed. None of this had appeared in the books.

Of course it had happened. Winterfell did not cease existing between chapters. People still cooked meals. Cleaned rooms. Mended harnesses. Argued over missing chickens. The world continued even when no reader watched it.

That thought unsettled him more deeply than the cold stone or locked door. In his bedroom, these people had existed inside paragraphs. Here, every unnamed servant possessed a childhood, fears, debts, jokes, and people who would mourn them. Every guard outside his door had a life beyond preventing his escape.

Even Alyn, who had kicked him, might have a mother waiting in a village or children somewhere inside the castle. Johnathan had arrived carrying knowledge of kings and wars. But the coming disaster would not kill only the names he remembered.

War would reach the people whose names had never been printed. He leaned closer to the bars.

Movement in the yard drew his attention. Two older boys crossed near the practice ground. The first had thick auburn hair and the beginning of a broad build. He wore boiled leather over wool and carried a blunted practice sword. Robb Stark. Johnathan recognized him instantly.

The boy beside him was leaner, dark-haired, and grey-eyed. His face was long, solemn, and unmistakably Stark. Jon Snow. They were younger than Johnathan's mind wanted them to be. That had been true of Ned as well, though differently. Johnathan had carried images from adaptations for so long that they had attached themselves to the names. The boys below shattered those images. Robb was not a young king.

He was fourteen. Jon was not a hardened commander of the Night's Watch. He was a boy standing slightly apart even while walking beside his brother. They were carrying wooden swords. Not Longclaw. Not the steel of kings. Wooden practice blades.

A dark-haired young man followed them with a bow slung over one shoulder and the easy posture of someone convinced the world existed for his amusement. Theon Greyjoy. Johnathan's first reaction was immediate and bitter. Traitor. The word came before he could stop it. He remembered Winterfell burning. Two murdered miller's boys.

The lie about Bran and Rickon. The capture of the castle. Then he forced himself to look again. Theon was nineteen. Proud. Restless. Careless.

Still years away from becoming Reek. Still months away from making the choices that would destroy him. Was it fair to hate a man for crimes he had not committed? Johnathan knew what Theon would do. Or what he had done in the story Johnathan

remembered. But that future was no longer guaranteed. Johnathan's presence had already changed something.

Even a warning spoken in panic could redirect a life. Perhaps Theon would never betray Robb. Perhaps he would do something worse. Knowing the old story did not grant Johnathan authority over the people living before him. It gave him responsibility. That was different. Robb said something Johnathan could not hear.

Theon laughed. Jon did not. They reached the practice yard. Ser Rodrik Cassel stood waiting with his arms folded over his chest. His great white whiskers made him instantly recognizable. Johnathan watched the boys take their positions. Robb and Jon began to spar. Their wooden swords struck with sharp cracks. Robb fought with strength and confidence. Jon moved more carefully. Quicker. Less willing to waste motion. Theon called something from the side. Robb answered without looking away from Jon. For a moment, they were only boys training together.

Not rivals. Not a king and a lord commander. Not a hostage and the son of his captor. Johnathan gripped the bars. They did not know. Robb did not know that men would one day crown him and then murder him beneath a roof where he had expected food and safety. Jon did not know that his life had been built around a promise made beside his dying mother.

Theon did not know that his desperate need to belong would cause him to betray nearly everyone who had ever offered him a home. Johnathan knew. The knowledge no longer felt exciting. It felt indecent. He had once argued about these people online. Had ranked their choices. Defended some.

Condemned others. He had spoken with the confidence of someone who knew the ending. From the tower, the ending seemed less important than the morning unfolding beneath him. Robb slipped. Jon struck him across the shoulder. Robb shoved him. Both boys nearly fell.

Ser Rodrik shouted. Theon laughed so hard that he bent forward. Robb threw a handful of snow at him. For several seconds, the future King in the North chased Theon Greyjoy

around the yard while Jon stood grinning behind them. Johnathan's throat tightened.

"They're children."

He had known their ages. Knowing a number was not the same as seeing it. The stories had forced them to grow quickly. Memory had compressed the change. Here, before the war, they were unmistakably young. A smaller figure appeared along the edge of the yard. A boy with auburn hair and a fur-lined cloak hurried toward the practice ground.

Bran. Johnathan stared. Bran Stark was walking. That should not have been remarkable. It felt miraculous. He moved with the loose energy of a child who believed walls existed to be climbed and instructions existed to be tested. Summer had not yet become his saddle.

The broken tower had not yet become the place where his life divided. Bran stopped near Ser Rodrik and watched the older boys. A large grey direwolf pup moved beside him. Not yet fully grown. Already much larger than any ordinary dog of the same age. Summer. The animal's head lifted.

Its eyes turned toward the tower. Toward Johnathan. Johnathan stepped back from the bars. Summer continued staring. Bran followed the direwolf's gaze. He looked up. For one moment, Johnathan and Bran saw one another.

The boy's face brightened with curiosity. He pointed. Johnathan remained motionless. Robb and Jon both turned. Theon shaded his eyes. Johnathan considered moving away. Instead, he raised one bound hand.

Bran waved immediately. Johnathan returned the gesture. Robb did not wave. Jon did not either. Both watched with caution. Theon said something that made Robb strike him lightly with the wooden sword. Johnathan could imagine the joke.

A ghost in dragon clothes. A madman in the tower. A Targaryen fool captured beneath the walls. Bran took several steps closer. Ser Rodrik caught him by the shoulder and turned

him back toward the yard. Summer remained fixed upon the window. The direwolf did not growl.

That was an improvement over the castle dogs. Another child entered the yard at a run. Small. Thin. Dark hair escaping around her face. Arya. She carried a wooden sword that looked stolen rather than issued.

A guard followed several steps behind, calling for her to stop. Arya ignored him. Johnathan smiled despite himself. She reached Jon and held up the sword. Jon looked toward the approaching guard. Then toward Arya. He took the practice blade from her and said something.

Arya folded both arms. Jon handed it back. The guard reached them and appeared to demand the weapon. Arya moved behind Jon. Jon spoke calmly. The guard looked toward Ser Rodrik. Ser Rodrik looked tired.

Johnathan could not hear the exchange, but he understood enough. Arya had not yet learned from Syrio Forel. She had not fled King's Landing. She had not seen Ned die. She had not whispered names to Jaqen H'ghar. She was simply a girl trying to hold a sword in a world that told her swords belonged to her brothers. A second girl appeared beneath a covered walkway.

Sansa. She wore a blue-grey dress beneath a warm cloak. Her auburn hair had been carefully arranged. Another girl walked beside her, Jeyne Poole, Johnathan guessed. Sansa stopped when she noticed Arya. Even at a distance, Johnathan saw the disapproval in her posture. Arya responded with some gesture. Jeyne laughed. Sansa said something sharper.

Arya shouted back. Robb stepped between them. Jon looked away as if this happened often. Johnathan watched the family gather in fragments. Robb. Jon. Bran.

Arya. Sansa. Somewhere inside Winterfell, Rickon was probably screaming at a nurse or following Shaggydog into trouble. They were together. Alive. Safe, for the moment. That was why Johnathan had always loved the early Winterfell chapters.

He had known tragedy waited beyond them. But from his bedroom, he could return to this part whenever he chose. He could reopen the book and place them together again. Here, there would be no return. Time moved in one direction. Johnathan's eyes remained on Bran. Soon the boy would climb the broken tower.

He would see Jaime and Cersei. Jaime would push him. Except Johnathan had already warned Ned that Robert was coming. Had he changed enough to prevent it? Perhaps Ned would become suspicious of the royal party. Perhaps he would keep the children away from the towers. Or perhaps his warning would be dismissed as madness.

Johnathan could escape the cell and find Bran himself. He looked at the stone wall beside the window. Could he pass through it? He had phased through the grip of a guard. The wolf had gone through him. Stone was different. If the ability failed halfway through, he might become trapped inside several feet of masonry.

Would that kill him? He did not know whether he could die. That was not the same as being eager to experiment. Johnathan approached the wall. He placed both bound hands against the stone. Warmth from Winterfell's hot springs lived deep inside it. He could feel the pressure of the surface.

The grain. Tiny cracks. He closed his eyes. His body had changed when he was frightened. Then again when he deliberately focused near the outer wall. He searched for the same sensation. Less weight. Less resistance. Become the space between things. His fingertips faded. The stone became visible through them. Johnathan opened his eyes. His hands were translucent. He pushed forward.

His fingers entered the wall. There was no scraping. No pain. No resistance. The stone swallowed them to the first knuckle. Johnathan stopped. A strange sensation spread along his skin.

Not cold. Not heat. Density. He could feel the wall around his fingers without touching it in any normal sense. It was

everywhere at once, a heavy awareness surrounding each faded part of him. He drew his hands back. They emerged unharmed. Color returned.

Johnathan stared. The ropes remained around his wrists. He looked down at them. During the change, the rope had faded with him. His clothing did the same. Objects close to his body could somehow become part of the effect. That was useful.

Terrifying, but useful. He turned toward the door. He could leave. The lock did not matter. The guards did not matter. Winterfell's walls might not matter. He could walk directly through the door, cross the passage, and disappear into the castle.

The thought sent a rush through him. Power. Freedom. No prison could hold him. No guard could stop him. He could enter Ned Stark's solar without permission. He could stand inside the crypts.

He could reach Bran before Jaime ever touched him. He could walk into Cersei's chamber. Into King's Landing. Into the Red Keep. Casterly Rock. Pyke. Any locked room.

Any secret passage. The world had become open to him. Johnathan smiled. Then the smile faded. He had no idea how long he could remain incorporeal. He did not know whether Valyrian steel could strike him. He did not know whether magic could trap him.

More importantly, the ability to enter any room did not grant him the right to do so. He imagined standing over a sleeping child because he had decided the future justified it. He imagined secretly watching every conversation. Learning every thought. Controlling events because he believed he knew better. That path did not end with him saving everyone. It ended with him becoming something no one could escape.

Maesters, kings, and lords would fear him. Perhaps they should. Johnathan returned to the window. The children remained below. The practice had dissolved into argument. Arya still held the wooden sword. Sansa was leaving with Jeyne.

Bran had become interested in something on a nearby roof. Johnathan's gaze snapped toward him. The boy looked up at the wall. Measuring it. Johnathan knew that expression. Bran intended to climb.

"Bran."

The name escaped him. The boy could not have heard from that distance. Summer's ears lifted.

Johnathan gripped the bars again. He could phase out. Go down. Stop him.

But what would happen when the guards saw their prisoner walking through stone? What would Bran think if a cold man in dragon clothing appeared beside him and said he knew the boy's future?

Johnathan's intervention might frighten the family enough to have him killed or sent away before the royal party arrived. Then he would be unable to stop the fall when it truly mattered. He needed trust. Not fear. And he had spent his first meeting creating nothing but fear.

Below, Jon called to Bran. The boy turned away from the wall and ran toward him. Johnathan relaxed slightly. Not today. The fall did not happen today. He thought it did not. The timeline had not yet made itself clear.

How long before Robert arrived? The original fragment in his memory said weeks. But memory was not a clock. The raven announcing Jon Arryn's death might already have reached Winterfell. Ned might already know. Johnathan's warning could have come after the news rather than before it. He needed information.

A date. A conversation. Anything. He studied the yard. No royal preparations were obvious. No enormous stores arriving. No frantic cleaning.

No new pavilions. That suggested Robert was not expected immediately. Unless Winterfell had not yet received the message. Johnathan thought of the phrase he had shouted. Tell Jon Arryn

the seed is strong. But Jon Arryn might already be dead. The line was not a warning to a living man.

It was a confession from a dying one. Had Johnathan just announced knowledge of the Hand's final words before Ned had even learned of the death? That would explain the silence. He moved away from the window. His earlier excitement had become a knot of dread. Every piece of knowledge carried consequences. A fact revealed too early could be as dangerous as a lie.

He had assumed knowing the story made him prepared. Instead, he was like a physician holding an entire pharmacy without labels. The medicines might save lives. The wrong dose could kill. Johnathan sat on the cot again. He needed rules. Simple rules.

He began speaking them aloud.

"First, do not reveal secrets just because I know them."

That rule had arrived slightly late.

"Second, do not accuse anyone without proof."

Also late.

"Third, prevent immediate deaths before trying to repair the entire realm."

That seemed reasonable.

"Fourth, remember that everyone here is a person, not a plot."

He looked toward the window. That was the most important one.

"Fifth, do not assume the story will happen exactly the same way now that I am here."

He paused.

"Sixth, stop talking when frightened."

Alyn laughed outside the door.

"He is speaking to himself now."

Johnathan ignored him.

"Seventh, do not become a tyrant because walls cannot stop me."

The conversation outside went silent again. Jory spoke through the door.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

“You said something about walls.”

“I said the walls are very well constructed.”

A pause.

“Keep away from them.”

Johnathan looked toward the place where his fingers had entered the stone.

“Absolutely.”

Footsteps moved closer. The viewing slit opened. Jory’s eyes appeared. Johnathan remained seated.

“What were you doing at the wall?”

“Admiring the masonry.”

Jory stared at him.

“You are a poor liar.”

“I have had a strange morning.”

The slit slammed shut. Johnathan heard Jory whisper to Alyn.

“Watch the hinges.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Just watch them.”

Johnathan leaned back against the wall behind the cot. He did not need air. He did not need warmth. He did not feel tired in any physical sense. Yet his mind felt exhausted. He thought of home again. Ohio. The hospital. His girlfriend asleep beside him. Had time stopped there? Was he missing? Dead? Would anyone believe what had happened if he somehow returned? He imagined explaining that he had spent the morning imprisoned at Winterfell.

She would think he had suffered a neurological event. Johnathan might have thought the same. He missed his phone. Coffee. Electric light. Running water. He missed the harmless irritation of hospital paperwork.

He even missed the vending machine dinner. The tower cell made his former complaints seem like luxury. Then laughter rose from the yard. Bran's laughter. Johnathan stood and returned to the window. The children had moved nearer. Robb was carrying Bran beneath one arm while the younger boy kicked and shouted.

Arya chased them. Jon followed with Summer and Grey Wind. Theon stood aside, calling encouragement to whichever brother appeared most likely to win. Sansa watched from beneath the covered passage, trying to appear uninterested. The scene had no importance. No secret. No prophecy. No future king. No broken boy. No assassin. No betrayal. Only a family in a courtyard. Johnathan watched them until his earlier shame changed into something else. Resolve.

He could not save them by treating them like characters. He could not protect them by shouting every terrible future at once. He needed to learn who they were here. Not who they became in the story he remembered. He needed Ned's trust. Luwin's help. Perhaps Benjen's.

He needed to know the date and what events had already happened. He needed evidence. Most of all, he needed restraint. The ability to walk through walls did not make him a god. It made him a man who could violate every boundary around him. The knowledge of the future did not make him wise. It made every careless word more dangerous.

Johnathan looked at Jon. The boy had stopped beneath the tower. He was staring upward again. Unlike Bran, he did not wave. His dark grey eyes studied the barred window with quiet suspicion. Johnathan wondered what rumors had already reached the yard. A Targaryen spy.

A corpse. A sorcerer. A madman from Ohio. Jon understood what it meant to be watched and judged before anyone knew him. Perhaps that was why he did not join the others in pointing. Johnathan raised one hand slowly. Jon hesitated.

Then gave the smallest nod. The gesture struck Johnathan harder than Alyn's boot. He lowered his hand. The boy turned and followed Robb. Johnathan remained at the window long after the yard had begun to empty. The children were real. Their happiness was real.

So would be their suffering. He could change what came next. That did not mean every change would be merciful. Johnathan was not the author of this world. He was not its god. He was the variable. And variables could save a life.

They could also destroy the entire result. Footsteps sounded in the passage. More than two people this time. Jory and Alyn stopped speaking. The steps approached the iron-studded door. Johnathan stepped away from the window. He looked down at the red dragons covering his pajamas and smoothed the cloth across his chest.

Whatever came next, he would try to speak carefully. The viewing slit began to open. Johnathan Harrow waited inside the tower while Winterfell watched him back.

CHAPTER 4

THE SALT OF THE NORTH

The viewing slit slid open. A pair of brown eyes appeared within the narrow opening. They belonged to a young girl. She could not have been older than twelve or thirteen. Soot darkened one cheek, and several strands of brown hair had escaped from the cloth tied around her head. She looked at Johnathan with the frightened curiosity of someone peering into a cage at an unfamiliar animal.

“Here is something to eat,” she whispered. Johnathan stood near the barred window. His wrists were free now. Jory had removed the rope before locking him inside, though Johnathan could still feel the memory of its rough fibers against his skin. The girl glanced down the passage before adding, even more quietly, “Lord Stark said you might be hungry.”

“Thank you.”

A guard’s voice came sharply from outside.

“Back against the far wall.”

Johnathan looked behind himself.

“I am already near the far wall.”

“Stay there.”

He raised both hands.

“Staying.”

The girl disappeared from the opening. Wood scraped against stone. A narrow hatch opened near the bottom of the door, wider than the viewing slit but barely tall enough to admit a tray. The smell reached Johnathan first. Mutton. Old grease. Oats.

Wet wool. And something sour he could not identify. The girl pushed the tray through. It held a wooden bowl, a horn spoon, a thick piece of dark bread, and a small mound of coarse white salt. The contents of the bowl were grey and lumpy. They looked

like baby vomit mixed with wet dog hair. The hatch slammed shut.

Metal scraped into place. The guard spoke again.

“Take it.”

Johnathan crossed the cell.

“This is starting to feel like *Skyrim*.”

Silence followed outside. The girl whispered, “What is a sky rim?”

“Nothing helpful.”

Johnathan picked up the tray. It was warm. Not hot, but warm enough for steam to rise from the porridge. He carried it to the stone cot and sat. The bread was dense and slightly stale. The salt looked coarse enough to scrape ice from a road. Johnathan stared at them both. Bread and salt.

Guest right. The thought arrived with surprising force. In Westeros, food was not always merely food. Bread and salt beneath another person’s roof could establish one of the oldest and most sacred protections in the known world. Once welcomed as a guest, a person was supposed to remain safe beneath the host’s roof. The guest, in turn, was forbidden from harming the host. Even the North feared the consequences of violating that bond. Johnathan looked toward the locked door. Had Ned done this deliberately?

Was Johnathan protected now? Could Eddard Stark imprison someone, give him bread and salt, and then cut his head off without violating one of the oldest laws of his people? Probably not. Unless food given to a prisoner did not count. That seemed like exactly the sort of legal question readers could argue about for twenty years without receiving a useful answer. Johnathan picked up the bread. The surface felt rough beneath his fingers.

He broke off a piece and touched it to the salt. The crystals clung to it. Outside, one of the guards shifted his weight. Johnathan placed the bread in his mouth. The taste was stronger than he expected. Dark grain. Smoke.

Salt. A faint sourness from whatever had been used to make the dough rise. He chewed slowly. His mouth worked. He could taste. He could swallow. That should not have felt miraculous.

It did. Johnathan had no heartbeat. He did not need to breathe. Cold did not affect him. Pain had become little more than distant pressure. Yet bread still tasted like bread. The piece moved down his throat without difficulty.

He waited. Nothing happened. No nausea. No pain. No sudden return of a heartbeat. His body accepted the food, though it had never asked for it. Johnathan looked down at his stomach.

“Are you still doing anything in there?”

No answer came. He had not felt hungry since waking in the forest. He had not felt thirsty either. He could still eat. That did not mean he needed to. Johnathan dipped the horn spoon into the bowl. The porridge resisted.

He lifted a grey lump and examined it.

“When in Rome.”

He tasted it. Salt struck first. An extraordinary amount of salt. Then mutton fat. Oats. Onion. Something bitter and green that might have been an herb or might have been an unfortunate leaf that had fallen into the pot.

Johnathan swallowed. It tasted considerably better than it looked. That was not difficult. He took another spoonful. The porridge was heavy, warm, and filling in the way food became when it had been designed for people who worked outside in cold weather. Johnathan’s body did not need the warmth. His mind did.

He had awakened in the snow. Been attacked by a wolf. Discovered that he had no pulse. Walked beneath Winterfell’s walls. Been bound, kicked, dragged through the castle, questioned by Eddard Stark, and locked inside a tower. Now he was sitting in a cell eating mutton porridge from a wooden bowl. The sheer normality of the act made everything else feel slightly less impossible.

Johnathan dipped another piece of bread into the porridge. He had eaten bread and salt beneath Winterfell's roof. Perhaps that made him a guest. Perhaps it made him a prisoner who had been given breakfast. Either way, Ned Stark had ordered him fed. That mattered. A lord who intended to murder him quietly would probably not send warm food first.

Probably. Johnathan paused.

"This world has destroyed my ability to trust breakfast."

Someone laughed outside the door. The laugh ended quickly. Johnathan continued eating. He did not feel fuller. That was strange. His stomach accepted every mouthful, but there was no sensation of hunger fading because no hunger had existed. The food seemed to vanish into a body that still remembered how to eat without requiring the result.

He finished half the bowl and stopped. Eating more merely to conduct an experiment felt wasteful. People in this world could not order another meal by touching a screen. The porridge represented grain harvested, dried, transported, ground, cooked, and carried through a freezing castle. A sheep had died for the pieces of mutton inside it. Johnathan placed the spoon down. Outside the door, the soot-faced girl spoke.

"Did he eat it?"

"Aye."

That voice belonged to Alyn. Johnathan recognized it immediately. The guard who had kicked him.

Another man stood with him. His voice was lower and older.

"Not much."

"Would you eat if you were the one inside?"

"I would eat if they put me in with a wolf."

"He may be worse than a wolf."

"He said thank you."

"So might a demon."

The girl whispered, "He does not look like a demon." Alyn snorted.

"You saw his skin?"

“No.”

“You saw what he wears.”

Johnathan looked down at his pajamas. The repeated red dragons seemed bright even within the dim cell. Outside, Alyn continued.

“Black and red. The Mad King’s beast on every inch of him.”

The second guard grunted.

“Fine cloth.”

“Finer than any I have seen.”

“Too smooth.”

“I wager a merchant would give silver for it.”

“More than silver.”

“Only if Lord Stark permits it sold.”

Johnathan’s head lifted. The words were quiet. The door was thick. He should not have heard them so clearly. He focused on Alyn’s voice. A strange certainty formed inside him. The guard wanted the pajamas. Not merely because they were valuable. Alyn wanted them gone from Johnathan’s body. The dragons frightened him. Selling them would turn fear into coin. It would make impossible cloth ordinary. Johnathan stared at the door. The understanding felt too immediate. Too complete.

For one wild second, excitement displaced caution. *Can I read their minds?* His chest tightened around a heartbeat that did not exist. *That would be so fucking cool.* Johnathan concentrated harder. Alyn stood beyond the door. Johnathan imagined reaching outward.

He searched for words that had not been spoken. Thoughts. Memories. Images. Anything. Nothing came. Only the faint sound of breathing.

Boot leather against stone. The scrape of mail. The second guard whispered, “You would need to wash the dead man’s smell from them.” Alyn answered, “He does not smell dead.” Johnathan relaxed. He was not hearing thoughts. He was hearing two men whisper through a quiet door.

As for their intentions, anyone with basic social awareness could understand what fear and greed sounded like. Johnathan had spent years reading expressions in hospital rooms. A spouse who refused to look at a scan. A parent asking the same question three times. A patient pretending not to fear the word *cancer*. People announced their intentions through posture, tone, silence, and the questions they avoided. That was not telepathy.

It was observation. Johnathan felt oddly disappointed. Then relieved. Walking through walls was already more power than one person should possess. Adding access to every thought around him would make human boundaries nearly meaningless. He remembered the rules he had spoken aloud earlier. Do not become a tyrant because walls cannot stop you.

He silently added another. Do not assume every accurate guess is magic. The girl whispered, "Will Lord Stark kill him?" Neither guard answered immediately. Alyn spoke first.

"Lord Stark will learn what he is."

"That was not my question."

"It is not yours to ask."

Johnathan looked at the remaining bread. The girl sounded frightened for him. A child he had never met. He stood and carried the tray toward the door.

"I am finished."

Alyn barked, "Back." Johnathan stopped.

"I was bringing the tray."

"Put it down and move away."

Johnathan placed it upon the floor. He retreated toward the window. The lower hatch opened. The soot-faced girl reached through and dragged the tray into the passage. Before the hatch closed, Johnathan spoke.

"The food was good."

The girl looked up.

"It was only porridge."

"I have eaten worse."

That was true. He had eaten hospital cafeteria food. The girl smiled. Alyn closed the hatch. Johnathan returned to the window. Winterfell continued moving beneath the pale sky. Servants crossed the yard. Men hauled bundles of firewood. A cart carrying sacks of grain passed beneath the tower. The Stark children were no longer near the practice ground. Several direwolf pups remained visible. Grey Wind chased something between two buildings. Summer followed Bran along a covered walkway. Johnathan watched until the boy disappeared.

His mind returned to the truth hidden inside Jon Snow. Lyanna Stark. Rhaegar Targaryen. A child carried away from the Tower of Joy beneath a promise that had defined Ned Stark's life. Johnathan had nearly shouted too much already. He had imagined knowledge as proof. Now he understood how dangerous proof could be.

Telling Jon might save him from years of believing himself unwanted. It might also place him beneath Robert Baratheon's hammer. A secret did not become harmless merely because it was true. Johnathan rested his hands against the stone beneath the window. He would keep Jon's identity to himself. For now. He would tell Ned privately that he knew only if the knowledge became necessary.

He would not reveal it in front of Catelyn. He would not tell Robb. He would certainly not announce it in the Great Hall.

"That would be insane."

Johnathan nodded to himself. He had developed a strong plan. The fact that his previous plans had survived for only a few minutes did not need to be examined. Footsteps approached through the passage. Alyn and the second guard stopped speaking. A chain made a faint metallic sound. Not a prisoner's chain. Smaller links. Many of them. The viewing slit opened again. Maester Luwin looked inside. Johnathan recognized him immediately. The old maester was smaller than Johnathan had imagined. His grey hair had thinned across the top of his head, leaving more above the ears and at the back. Fine lines

surrounded sharp, attentive eyes. His face was neither kindly nor cruel.

It was observant. That seemed more appropriate. Maesters survived by noticing what lords ignored. Luwin carried a folded bundle of grey wool against his chest.

“I have brought clothing.”

Johnathan glanced down at the Targaryen pajamas.

“Are these upsetting people?”

“Yes.”

“Fair.”

The viewing slit closed. Johnathan heard the bolt draw back. The door opened slowly. Alyn entered first with his sword drawn. The second guard followed with a spear. Luwin came behind them. He carried no weapon.

His chain rested against his grey robes, every link forged from a different metal. Iron. Copper. Bronze. Silver. Black iron. And one link darker than the rest.

Valyrian steel. Johnathan knew Luwin had forged that link while studying what the Citadel called the higher mysteries. Most maesters believed magic had vanished from the world. Luwin had once tried to light a glass candle. It had remained dark. That failure had shaped much of what he believed. Luwin placed the folded clothing upon the stone cot.

“A tunic, breeches, wool stockings, and boots. A cloak will be brought if Lord Stark permits you to leave the tower.”

Johnathan touched the top garment. The wool was rough.

“Real clothes.”

The smallest hint of disapproval crossed Luwin’s face.

“Those are also real clothes.”

Johnathan looked down at the red dragons.

“Thank you for acknowledging them.”

“They are strange, provocative, impossibly made, and dangerously marked. They remain clothing.”

“That is very open-minded.”

“I have not finished examining them.”

Johnathan drew his hand away from the wool.

“For later?”

“For your questioning.”

Luwin’s eyes moved over his face.

“You will not stand before Lord Stark wearing the sigil of the dynasty that murdered his father and brother.”

“I did not choose the pattern for political reasons.”

“So you have claimed.”

“It was a gift.”

“From whom?”

Johnathan hesitated. The image of his girlfriend sleeping beside him returned with painful clarity. Her hair across the pillow. The lamp beside the bed. The quiet heating system. A world of electric light and hospital corridors.

“Someone important to me.”

Luwin noticed the change in his expression. His voice softened slightly.

“Someone in Ohio?”

“Yes.”

“Your wife?”

“No.”

“A betrothed?”

“Not formally.”

Luwin accepted the answer.

“Is she likely to come searching for you?”

Johnathan looked toward the window.

“I hope not.”

“Because she would be in danger?”

“Because I do not know what happened to me.”

The words left the room quiet. Johnathan touched one of the small dragons on his sleeve.

“She may have awakened beside my body.”

Alyn shifted near the door. Luwin’s expression did not change, but his attention sharpened.

“Your body.”

"I may be dead where I come from."

"And alive here?"

"I am not certain I am alive here either."

Alyn muttered a prayer. The spearman made a sign Johnathan did not recognize. Luwin held up one hand.

"Leave us."

Alyn stared at him.

"Maester, "

"You will remain outside the open door."

"He passed through my hand."

"I have been told."

"He could seize you."

Johnathan lifted his empty hands.

"I could probably seize him without a weapon."

Alyn's sword moved slightly. Johnathan immediately regretted speaking. Luwin did not look away from him.

"Stand outside."

The guards obeyed reluctantly. They remained visible through the doorway. Alyn did not sheath his sword. Luwin crossed the room.

"Sit."

Johnathan sat upon the stone cot. The maester took a small leather case from inside his robes and opened it. Inside were narrow tools, folded cloth, a polished metal mirror, several small bottles, and needles. Johnathan examined them.

"Medical examination?"

"You recognized the instruments."

"Some of them."

"You claim to be a healer."

"I am a physician."

"What is the difference?"

"Mostly years of education and professional arrogance."

Luwin waited. Johnathan sighed.

"A physician is a kind of healer trained to examine illness and injury through the study of the body."

“How long did you study?”

“Four years at a university. Four years of medical school. Then residency.”

Luwin frowned.

“You studied healing for more than eight years?”

“Yes.”

“Under one master?”

“Many.”

“Where is your chain?”

“We do not use chains.”

“How do others know what you have learned?”

“Degrees. Licenses. Records.”

“Objects?”

“Mostly paper and databases.”

“What is a database?”

“A problem for another day.”

Luwin removed the polished mirror.

“Look at me.”

Johnathan obeyed. The maester angled the mirror to catch light from the window and reflected it into one eye. Johnathan’s pupil contracted. Then the other. Luwin repeated the examination.

“Your eyes react normally.”

“So far as I know.”

“You see clearly?”

“Yes.”

“No doubling?”

“No.”

“Flashes of light?”

“Only when the wolf passed through me.”

Luwin stopped.

“The wolf.”

Johnathan explained the attack. He described the animal lunging. His body fading. The wolf passing through him and

landing in the snow. Luwin listened without interruption. When Johnathan finished, the maester asked, "Was it a direwolf?"

"I don't think so. Large, but not that large."

"You have seen a direwolf before?"

"Not until today."

"Yet you know their size."

Johnathan looked toward the doorway. Alyn was listening.

"I have read descriptions."

"In Ohio."

"Yes."

"Your homeland possesses writings about direwolves?"

"It possesses writings about many things."

"Things found only in Westeros?"

"Yes."

Luwin closed the mirror.

"That answer will concern Lord Stark."

"Most of my answers seem to do that."

The maester took Johnathan's wrist. His fingers were warm against Johnathan's cold skin. Luwin searched for a pulse. His face remained controlled. He moved his fingers. Pressed harder. Changed wrists. Johnathan watched the exact sequence every inexperienced medical student performed when hoping a missed pulse was the result of poor placement. Luwin moved to his neck. His fingertips settled against the carotid artery. Nothing moved beneath them.

"How long have you been without a pulse?"

"Since I awakened."

"And before?"

"I had one."

"You are certain."

"I was a physician. I knew how a heartbeat felt."

Luwin placed one hand over Johnathan's chest.

"Breathe."

Johnathan inhaled. The maester watched his ribs rise.

"Again."

Johnathan obeyed.

“Stop.”

He stopped breathing. Luwin waited. Johnathan remained still. Half a minute passed. Then another. The maester’s calm expression began to strain.

“Do you feel discomfort?”

“No.”

“Dizziness?”

“No.”

“Pain in the chest?”

“No.”

“An urge to draw breath?”

“No.”

Luwin placed two fingers beneath Johnathan’s nose. No air moved. The maester waited longer.

“Speak.”

“This examination is becoming socially awkward.”

Luwin withdrew his hand.

“You breathe to speak.”

“Yes.”

“But not to live.”

“That appears to be the case.”

“What carries air through your body?”

“My lungs still expand.”

“What carries life through your blood?”

“I don’t know.”

“Your heart does not beat.”

“No.”

“Yet your muscles move.”

“Yes.”

“Your eyes see.”

“Yes.”

“You think.”

“On good days.”

Luwin ignored that.

“You eat.”

“I just did.”

“Do you pass waste?”

Johnathan blinked.

“I arrived this morning.”

“That was not my question.”

“I have not yet had the opportunity to find out.”

Luwin made a small sound. Not quite irritation. Not quite embarrassment. He recorded something on a narrow piece of parchment. Johnathan tried to read it. The writing was small and angular.

“Can I see?”

“No.”

“I am the patient.”

“You are also the mystery.”

“Patients are usually allowed access to their medical records where I come from.”

“Then return there and request them.”

Johnathan looked offended.

“That was cold.”

Luwin raised his eyes from the parchment.

“You are colder.”

Johnathan stared at him. The maester’s face remained perfectly serious.

“Was that a joke?”

“No.”

“It was good.”

“That is unfortunate.”

Johnathan smiled despite himself. Luwin reached for one of the needles. Alyn stepped closer to the doorway.

“What are you doing?”

“Testing sensation.”

Johnathan held out one hand. The maester pressed the tip carefully against his palm. Johnathan felt pressure. No pain.

Luwin increased the force. The skin did not break. He pressed harder.

The needle bent. Everyone stared. Johnathan turned his hand over. No puncture. No mark.

“That was a good needle,” Luwin murmured.

“Sorry.”

“You did nothing.”

“I still feel responsible.”

The maester selected a second instrument with a broader point. Johnathan shook his head.

“You will damage that one too.”

“You object to the examination?”

“No. I am trying to save your supplies.”

Luwin returned the instrument to the case.

“You felt something?”

“Pressure. The shape of the point. No pain.”

“Could you feel Alyn’s kick?”

Alyn’s jaw tightened outside the door.

“Yes.”

The guard appeared almost relieved.

“Did it hurt?”

“No.”

His relief vanished. Johnathan touched his ribs.

“I knew exactly where the boot struck. I felt the force. My body moved. There was simply no pain afterward.”

“No bruising?”

“None.”

“No difficulty breathing?”

“I don’t need to breathe.”

Luwin wrote again. Johnathan watched the links of his chain shift. The dark one rested near the front.

“You have a Valyrian steel link.”

The quill stopped. Luwin slowly lifted his head. Alyn’s grip tightened around his sword. The maester touched the dark link.

“How did you know?”

“You studied the higher mysteries.”

A long silence followed. Luwin looked at his chain, then back at Johnathan.

“Few men in Winterfell know what every link represents.”

“I do.”

“The meanings are not explained to common travelers.”

“I am not a common traveler.”

“That much is clear.”

Luwin closed the leather case.

“What do you believe the link signifies?”

“The study of magic. Sorcery. What the Citadel calls the higher mysteries.”

“And what do you believe I learned?”

“That you found very little evidence.”

Luwin’s eyes narrowed. Johnathan continued carefully.

“You tried to light a glass candle.”

The old maester became perfectly still. Outside, neither guard moved. Johnathan immediately understood that he had gone too far. Again. Luwin’s hand closed around the dark link.

“Who told you that?”

“No one here.”

“Who?”

“A source from my world.”

“What source?”

Johnathan struggled for an answer that would not sound insane. There was none.

“A book.”

Alyn laughed sharply.

“A book in Ohio tells of Maester Luwin’s chain?”

“Yes.”

“Liar.”

Johnathan looked at him.

“I wish I were.”

Luwin’s gaze did not waver.

“What else did this book say about me?”

“That you serve House Stark faithfully.”

“Flattery.”

“That you delivered Lady Catelyn’s children.”

“That is known.”

“You studied healing, herblore, ravencraft, history, mathematics, construction, astronomy, and the higher mysteries.”

“Any man might guess a maester’s studies from his chain.”

“Your glass candle did not light.”

Luwin’s mouth tightened. Johnathan continued more carefully.

“You took that failure as evidence that magic had left the world. You were not foolish. You conducted an experiment. The result was failure, so you accepted the result.”

The maester studied him.

“And you think I was wrong.”

Johnathan looked at his own hands.

“One of your guards watched his fingers pass through my arm.”

Alyn muttered, “I know what I saw.”

“Yes,” Johnathan answered. “So does Maester Luwin.”

Luwin’s voice remained quiet.

“Do not presume to tell me what I know.”

“Fair.”

“What are you?”

“I don’t know.”

“You expect me to accept ignorance from a man who claims to know my private studies?”

“I know this world better than I know myself.”

“That is not an answer.”

“It is the most honest one I have.”

Luwin walked toward the window. He looked down into the ward. Johnathan watched the chain move across his robes.

“You spoke of warging,” the maester said.

“Yes.”

“What do you know of it?”

“More than most south of the Wall. Less than I should.”

“Explain.”

Johnathan considered every word.

“A warg can enter the mind of a wolf. A skinchanger may do something similar with other animals. The connection is not merely command. The animal’s senses and instincts may mix with the person’s.”

Luwin turned.

“You speak with certainty.”

“The ability is real.”

“You have witnessed it?”

“No.”

“Then your certainty comes from your books.”

“Yes.”

“The same books that describe my chain.”

“Yes.”

“Do they claim the Stark children are wargs?”

Johnathan said nothing. The question entered the room like a drawn blade. Alyn looked from Luwin to Johnathan. The direwolves had been found that morning. The Stark children had them. In the future Johnathan remembered, their abilities would awaken differently and unevenly. Jon and Bran would show the clearest signs.

Arya would dream through Nymeria from across the narrow sea. Robb’s connection with Grey Wind would shape battles and terrify his enemies. Rickon and Shaggydog would become almost feral together. Sansa’s bond had been severed before it could fully develop. But Lady was alive now. All six wolves remained at Winterfell. The future had already changed.

Johnathan chose his words.

“I think the possibility exists.”

Luwin’s expression hardened.

“Possibility.”

“Yes.”

“Not certainty.”

“Not without observation.”

“What sort of observation?”

“Dreams. Behavior. Shared awareness. Whether a child knows something only the animal could have seen.”

Luwin came closer.

“You will not conduct such an examination without Lord Stark’s consent.”

“I was not planning to.”

“You will not touch the children.”

Johnathan looked at the guards.

“I am locked in a tower.”

“That is not the same as agreement.”

“No.”

Johnathan met the maester’s eyes.

“I will not touch them without permission.”

Luwin accepted the answer. Johnathan noticed that the maester had warned him away rather than dismissing the possibility. Luwin might doubt magic. He did not ignore danger.

“You believe the direwolves matter,” Johnathan said.

“Every large predator inside a castle matters.”

“That is not what I meant.”

“It is the answer you will receive.”

Johnathan nodded.

“Fair.”

Luwin collected the folded northern clothing.

“You must change.”

“Here?”

“The guards will turn their backs.”

Alyn objected immediately.

“I will not turn my back on him.”

Luwin looked toward the open doorway.

“Then you may continue staring while he removes his strange garments.”

Alyn's face changed. The second guard turned at once. Alyn hesitated, then faced the passage. Luwin placed the clothing on the cot.

"I will remain."

"Medical supervision?"

"Evidence."

Johnathan looked down at the pajamas.

"You want them."

"I want to examine them."

"You cannot cut them."

Luwin's eyebrows rose.

"They are the last thing I have from home."

The words removed all humor from the exchange. Johnathan touched the collar. His girlfriend had selected the pajamas because she knew the dragons would make him laugh. She had held the shirt against his chest in the shop, judging its size. She had wrapped the box badly because she claimed precise corners were emotionally dishonest. Johnathan remembered opening it. Remembered pretending disappointment. Remembered her threatening to return them. He had kissed her before she finished the sentence. Now the cloth was evidence inside a medieval tower. Luwin looked at the pajamas differently.

"I will not damage them without your permission."

"Thank you."

"You trust my word?"

"You serve Eddard Stark."

"That was not what I asked."

Johnathan met his eyes.

"Yes."

The answer appeared to surprise both of them. Luwin inclined his head. Johnathan removed the pajama shirt. The room became quiet. Alyn glanced over his shoulder despite himself. Johnathan's chest was extremely pale. Not the pallor of someone who avoided sunlight.

It possessed a faint grey undertone, smooth and almost bloodless. There was no movement over the heart. No pulse at the neck. No mist from his mouth. Luwin examined him without touching.

“No scars.”

“I had some.”

“Where?”

Johnathan pointed toward his elbow.

“A small one there. Another on my knee. A surgical scar near my abdomen.”

Nothing remained. The skin was flawless. Not healthy. Preserved. Johnathan removed the pajama trousers. Luwin handed him the wool breeches. The fabric scratched.

Johnathan could feel every rough fiber without discomfort. The tunic hung slightly loose across his shoulders. The stockings reached above his knees. The boots were a little large, but thick wool filled the empty space. Johnathan stood. He looked like a northern servant dressed by someone who had estimated his size from across a yard. Luwin gathered the pajamas carefully. The dragons vanished inside the fold. Johnathan felt more exposed after they were covered than he had while changing.

Those pajamas had been ridiculous. They had also been home.

“Return them.”

“When I have completed my examination.”

“Maester.”

“I gave my word not to damage them.”

“That is not the same.”

“No.”

Luwin held the folded bundle against his chest.

“If you are what you claim, these may be the only objects in this world made by your people. Their thread, color, fastening, and construction may reveal more than your answers.”

“You are going to study the buttons.”

“Yes.”

“They are plastic.”

“What is plastic?”

Johnathan sighed.

“Something that will ruin your afternoon.”

“I have endured difficult afternoons.”

“Not polyester.”

Luwin made another note. The old maester turned toward the door. Johnathan looked toward the empty tray hatch.

“Maester?”

Luwin stopped.

“The bread and salt.”

“What of them?”

“I ate both.”

“I was informed.”

Johnathan hesitated.

“Does that make me a guest?”

Alyn laughed outside. Luwin did not.

“No.”

Johnathan’s relief weakened.

“I thought guest right began with bread and salt.”

“It begins when a host welcomes a guest beneath his roof and offers protection. You were found hiding outside Winterfell, seized by guards, and locked in a tower.”

“Less welcoming when you list it that way.”

“You were fed because Lord Stark does not starve prisoners.”

“So I am not protected.”

“You are protected by Lord Stark’s law.”

“That is not guest right.”

“No.”

Johnathan looked toward the window.

“Would he kill me without hearing the truth?”

“No.”

The certainty in Luwin’s answer mattered.

“Would he torture me?”

The old maester’s face tightened.

“Lord Eddard does not delight in cruelty.”

“That was not exactly my question.”

“No,” Luwin answered. “Not while other paths remain.”

Johnathan absorbed that.

“Comforting, with a small threat attached.”

“You arrived wearing the dragon of the Mad King. You predicted the death of Jon Arryn before Lord Stark received confirmation. You spoke words connected to the dead Hand’s investigation. Guards saw your flesh vanish. You possess no heartbeat, do not require breath, and cannot be pierced with a needle.”

Luwin’s eyes held his.

“You should not expect comfort.”

Johnathan looked down at the rough grey wool.

“Fair.”

Luwin continued.

“Guest right is not a charm invoked by swallowing salt. It is a bond of trust between host and guest.”

“I know.”

“No. You know the words.”

That stung because it was true. Luwin adjusted the folded pajamas beneath one arm.

“Men remember the food because it marks the bond. The bond itself is what matters.”

Johnathan thought of the Red Wedding. Bread and salt offered. Music beginning. Crossbows hidden in the galleries. A mother realizing too late that ancient law meant nothing to people who had already decided honor was weakness. The Rat Cook had not been cursed merely for murder. He had broken guest right.

The North remembered that distinction for centuries. Johnathan looked at the maester.

“Trust first. Salt second.”

“Better.”

“And I have not earned the first.”

“No.”

“Has Lord Stark?”

Luwin studied him. Johnathan continued.

“I know what kind of man he is. Or I know what stories said he was. That is not the same as knowing him.”

“No.”

“But I trust that he will hear me before deciding.”

“That would be wise.”

“Is it true?”

“Yes.”

Johnathan nodded.

“Then that is enough for now.”

Luwin turned to leave. Johnathan spoke again.

“One more question.”

“You have asked many.”

“Did Lord Stark send the bread and salt deliberately?”

The maester’s mouth moved slightly. Perhaps amusement. Perhaps irritation.

“He ordered that you receive the same morning meal as the household guards.”

Johnathan looked toward Alyn. The guard remained facing the passage.

“So the porridge was not ceremonial.”

“No.”

“It was extremely salty.”

“It is the North.”

“That explains too much.”

Luwin stepped into the passage. The guards faced the room again. Alyn stared at Johnathan dressed in grey wool. Without the dragons, some of the terror had left his expression. Not all. Johnathan pointed toward the folded pajamas.

“You were discussing selling those.”

Alyn went still. The second guard looked at him. Luwin slowly turned. Alyn’s face flushed.

“We were not.”

“You were.”

“How could you hear us?”

“The door is thick, not magical.”

Alyn looked embarrassed. Johnathan continued.

“For one moment, I thought I could read minds.”

The guard stepped backward.

“You can?”

“No.”

“At least not like that,” Johnathan added. He immediately regretted the last sentence. Luwin noticed.

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing confirmed.”

The maester returned to the threshold.

“Explain.”

Johnathan considered lying. Luwin’s expression suggested it would fail.

“I know abilities exist in this world that can connect one mind to another.”

“Warging.”

“Among other things.”

“And you believe you possess such an ability?”

“I do not know.”

“Have you entered another person’s thoughts?”

“No.”

That was true.

“Have you attempted it?”

“No.”

Also true.

“Will you attempt it?”

“Not without permission.”

Luwin studied him for several breaths.

“Why would permission matter to a man who may be able to walk through stone?”

“Because ability is not ownership.”

The answer came immediately. Johnathan had not planned it. Luwin looked at him with something new. Not trust. Not yet.

Recognition, perhaps. The maester understood the danger Johnathan represented. Johnathan was beginning to understand it too. Luwin stepped away.

“In one hour, you will be brought before Lord Stark.”

Johnathan’s stomach might still have contained porridge. It did not tighten. His mind did.

“Where?”

“The Great Hall.”

“Who will be there?”

“Lord Eddard. Lady Catelyn. Myself. Captain Jory. Others Lord Stark considers necessary.”

“Robb?”

“Perhaps.”

“That seems unnecessary.”

“Lord Stark will decide who witnesses the questioning.”

“Maester, the fewer people who hear what I know, the safer everyone will be.”

Luwin’s voice hardened.

“You have already shouted warnings across Winterfell’s yard.”

“I was frightened.”

“You are frightened now.”

“Yes.”

“Then learn control quickly.”

Johnathan closed his mouth. Luwin was right. Again. The old man continued.

“You will explain where you came from, what you are, and how you knew the contents of a royal message before Lord Stark opened it.”

“I did not know every word.”

“You knew enough.”

“And if I refuse?”

“You will remain Lord Stark’s prisoner.”

“For how long?”

“Until he believes you are no threat, discovers the truth, or decides that the risk of keeping you alive outweighs the value of your answers.”

Johnathan looked toward Alyn’s sword.

“Direct.”

“You appear to respond poorly to subtlety.”

“That is becoming clear.”

Luwin’s expression softened slightly.

“Tell him the truth.”

Johnathan looked at the old maester.

“All of it?”

“That depends upon how many truths you possess.”

“Too many.”

“Then begin with the ones that can be proven.”

That sounded almost like medical advice. Start with evidence. Document what could be observed.

Separate certainty from assumption. Do not claim more than the facts supported. Johnathan nodded slowly.

“That may be the first useful advice anyone has given me today.”

“I gave you clothing.”

“The second useful advice.”

Luwin turned toward the stairs. Johnathan called after him.

“Maester.”

Luwin looked back.

“Thank you for not cutting the pajamas.”

The old man’s eyes moved briefly toward the folded dragons in his arms.

“Give Lord Stark reason to return them.”

Then he descended the stairs. Alyn closed the door. Before it shut completely, Johnathan heard Luwin speak to the guards.

“No one enters without my permission or Lord Stark’s.”

Alyn answered, “What if he passes through the door?”

“Then shouting will not improve the situation.”

The door closed. The bolt scraped into place. Johnathan stood alone. Grey wool covered him from neck to ankle. The clothes smelled faintly of smoke and cedar. The boots were heavy. The fabric was rough. He looked more like someone who belonged in Winterfell than he had an hour earlier. He felt less like himself. One hour. Lord Stark. Lady Catelyn. Maester Luwin. Jory.

Possibly Robb. Too many people. Too many secrets. Johnathan sat upon the cot and began sorting them in his mind. Robert Baratheon was coming north. Safe enough. The message had confirmed it.

Jon Arryn had been murdered. Dangerous, but necessary. The seed is strong. Ned had already heard the phrase. Cersei's children were Jaime's. Extremely dangerous. Petyr Baelish had betrayed nearly everyone who trusted him.

Useful, but difficult to prove. The Others were real. Crucial. Dragonglass could kill them. Also crucial. Bran would climb a tower and be pushed by Jaime. Immediate danger.

Jon Snow was the son of Lyanna Stark and Rhaegar Targaryen. Absolutely not. Johnathan nodded. That secret would remain unspoken. There was no reason to reveal it. None. He would not mention Lyanna. He would not say Rhaegar. He would not say the Tower of Joy. He would not speak any hidden royal name. He would speak carefully. Slowly. Like a physician explaining a dangerous diagnosis to a family that might react unpredictably. Facts first.

Evidence second. No dramatic speeches. No references to actors. No telling Eddard Stark that his life had been printed and sold as entertainment in another world. Johnathan leaned back against the wall.

"This will go perfectly."

The ceiling offered no support for that conclusion. He rose again. Sitting still made his thoughts worse. Johnathan walked to the window. Winterfell stretched beneath him. A raven landed upon a nearby roof. Its black head turned toward the tower.

Johnathan watched it. The raven watched him back. For an instant, the feeling became unpleasantly intimate. Not a thought. Not a voice. Only the sense of being observed by something more patient than a bird. Johnathan remembered the three-eyed crow.

Bloodraven. Roots beneath a hill far beyond the Wall. A pale man woven into a weirwood. Could he already be watching? That seemed impossible. Johnathan had walked through flesh and stone that morning. His standards for impossibility required revision.

The raven opened its wings and flew away. Below, a grey direwolf pup crossed the yard beside a dark-haired boy. Jon Snow. Johnathan's hands tightened around the bars. He remembered his promise to himself. Do not speak of Jon's mother. Not in front of Catelyn.

Not in front of Robb. Not before Ned decided the time was right. Johnathan would tell Ned only that he knew. Quietly. Privately. Perhaps not even today. That was all.

The boy below paused. Ghost stood beside him, white against the dark stone. Jon looked toward the tower. The distance was too great for Johnathan to read his expression. He knew the face anyway. Long. Solemn.

More Stark than any of Catelyn's sons. Johnathan lifted one hand. Jon did not wave. After a moment, he gave the same small nod he had offered before. Then he continued across the yard. Johnathan lowered his hand. The secret remained inside him.

For now. Behind the door, boots approached. Not yet the full escort. Only one guard changing places with another. Johnathan returned to the cot. He looked at his cold hands. He could pass through matter. He could survive blows that should break bone. He might possess other abilities he had not yet discovered. None of those powers could make him wise. Salt did not make him trusted. Knowledge did not make him careful. Power did not make him good. Those things would require choices.

In less than an hour, Johnathan Harrow would stand before the Starks and choose which truths to release into their lives.

Outside, Winterfell prepared for a king. Inside the tower, a dead physician prepared to lie by omission. The salt of the North remained upon his tongue. The taste was stronger than the bread. And the promise it represented had not yet been offered.

CHAPTER 5

THE RECKONING

Johnathan sat upon the stone cot, dressed in rough grey wool, and considered becoming a wizard. It was not the worst idea he had entertained that morning. Wizard was a flexible profession. No license required. No governing board. No malpractice insurance. A wizard could arrive from nowhere, know impossible things, survive being kicked across a courtyard, and refuse to explain himself without anyone finding the behavior especially unusual. Unfortunately, Johnathan was not a wizard. Greenseer sounded more respectable in the North, but he lacked green dreams, weirwood training, and the ability to say mysterious things without immediately ruining the effect with a joke.

Prophet might work. Prophets were expected to be unsettling. They made predictions, wore unusual clothing, frightened rulers, and generally avoided explaining their sources. Johnathan looked down at the grey tunic Maester Luwin had given him. The Targaryen pajamas were gone, carried away for examination. Without them, he looked less like a mad dragon prince and more like an unusually pale servant awaiting judgment. That was probably an improvement.

“I am a prophet from a distant land,” Johnathan tried aloud. The words echoed weakly around the chamber. He shook his head.

“Absolutely not.”

It sounded dishonest because it was dishonest. He knew the future, or one version of it, but he had not received sacred visions. No god had appeared before him. No burning tree had spoken his name. He had read books. Several times. That was considerably less impressive. Johnathan leaned forward and rested his elbows upon his knees. He needed a plan.

First, explain Earth. Second, explain that this world existed as a story in his world. Third, somehow prevent Eddard Stark from deciding that execution was the most sensible response. Fourth, warn them about Bran, Jon Arryn, Cersei, Jaime, the Others, Littlefinger, the royal succession, and approximately thirty future betrayals. Fifth, do all of that without destroying the family he had come to protect. Simple. He felt like Littlefinger plotting before breakfast.

The comparison made him sit straighter.

“No.”

Petyr Baelish plotted because he enjoyed moving people like pieces across a board. Johnathan was not here to move pieces. That was the danger. He already knew too much about these people. Their fears. Their mistakes. Their private grief. Their deaths. It would be easy to decide that knowledge entitled him to control them. It did not. People were not patients merely because he could diagnose the disasters approaching them.

A physician could explain the disease, recommend treatment, and warn of consequences. The patient still possessed the right to choose. Westeros had no meaningful concept of informed consent, but Johnathan did. He would remember it for both worlds. Footsteps climbed the spiral stair. More than two men. Mail whispered against leather. A sword struck stone with a soft metallic knock. Someone muttered when his shoulder brushed the narrow wall.

Johnathan stood. The bolt drew back. The door opened. Jory Cassel entered first. He wore mail beneath a heavy grey cloak, though his helmet remained tucked beneath one arm. His dark hair was damp from melting snow. Alyn followed with three other guards. Alyn no longer looked eager to kick anyone. Maester Luwin entered last. His chain rested against his robes. The dark Valyrian steel link sat among the other metals, no more obvious than before. Johnathan noticed it immediately anyway. Luwin held the folded Targaryen pajamas beneath one arm. Johnathan looked at them.

“Did the polyester survive?”

Luwin’s expression remained solemn.

“I have not discovered what that word means.”

“That means it survived.”

“The garments resisted every thread test I attempted without damage.”

“You tried burning them?”

“A single loose fiber.”

Johnathan stared. Luwin lifted one eyebrow.

“The garment remains unharmed.”

“You gave your word.”

“I did not cut it.”

“That is a very maesterly interpretation.”

“I am a maester.”

Johnathan looked toward Jory.

“May I have them back?”

“After the questioning,” Luwin answered.

“Assuming I survive.”

No one reassured him. Jory placed his helmet upon the small table.

“You will be bound.”

Johnathan looked at the rope in Alyn’s hand.

“Is that still necessary?”

“Yes.”

“You know it cannot hold me.”

“We know it has held you when you permit it.”

That was a fair answer. Johnathan held out his wrists. Alyn hesitated. Jory took the rope from him. The captain wrapped it carefully around Johnathan’s wrists and tied a firm knot. Johnathan concentrated upon his hands. Solid skin.

Solid bone. Weight. Resistance. The rope tightened properly. Jory tested it.

“You can remain as you are?”

“I believe so.”

“Believe harder.”

Johnathan looked at him.

“People here say that often.”

“Perhaps you require frequent reminders.”

Jory retrieved his helmet. Luwin stepped closer.

“Lord Stark will ask questions. Answer plainly.”

“I was planning to.”

“That claim does not agree with your earlier behavior.”

“I had a difficult morning.”

“You continue to have one.”

Johnathan glanced toward the open door.

“Who will be present?”

“Lord Eddard. Lady Catelyn. Robb Stark. Captain Jory. Myself.”

“Why Robb?”

“He is Lord Stark’s heir.”

“He is fourteen.”

“He will one day rule Winterfell.”

“Assuming we prevent everything that is coming.”

The guards exchanged uneasy looks. Luwin’s eyes sharpened.

“That is the sort of statement you should explain carefully.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

“No, but I am developing awareness.”

Jory took Johnathan’s left arm. Alyn stood on his right but did not touch him. Johnathan looked at the guard.

“You are not required to hold me.”

“I know.”

“Are you afraid I will turn to mist?”

Alyn’s jaw tightened.

“I am afraid you will stop pretending to be a man.”

Johnathan considered the answer.

“That makes two of us.”

The guard looked at him, surprised. Jory guided Johnathan into the passage. The door remained open behind them. They descended the spiral stair. Johnathan felt no fatigue as they circled downward. The guards’ breathing changed after the first

level. Mail and heavy clothing made the narrow steps difficult. Johnathan's body remained unchanged. No heartbeat.

No shortness of breath. No burning muscles. No sweat. The rope around his wrists felt like a loosely remembered sensation from another body. At the bottom of the tower, cold daylight entered through the open doorway. They crossed into Winterfell. The castle had changed since morning.

Not physically. The same towers stood beneath the pale northern sky. Steam still rose from warm channels in the stone. Servants still carried wood, water, grain, and food between buildings. But word had spread. Men stopped speaking when Johnathan passed. Women pulled children out of his path. Dogs barked from a distance but refused to come closer. A stable boy made the sign of the Seven.

An older servant touched two fingers to her lips and then toward the ground, perhaps invoking the old gods. Johnathan kept his eyes forward. The grey clothing helped. Without the dragons, fewer people stared. Those who recognized him stared harder. Jory led him across the inner yard. A raven sat upon the roof of the Great Keep.

Its head turned as Johnathan passed. He looked away. He had enough problems without imagining that Bloodraven was watching his court appearance through every bird in Winterfell. The doors of the Great Hall stood open. Two guards waited on either side. Johnathan had seen the hall from television, illustrations, and descriptions. None had prepared him for its size.

It was long enough to swallow the main floor of a modern church. Stone walls rose toward heavy beams blackened by centuries of smoke. Narrow windows admitted grey daylight. Iron chandeliers hung overhead, though only half their candles had been lit. Long tables had been moved toward the walls. The raised platform at the far end remained. The high seat of Winterfell stood beneath carved direwolves. Eddard Stark sat there. Ice lay across the table before him. Unsheathed.

The greatsword was larger than Johnathan remembered. The blade was dark grey, almost black, with rippling patterns running through the Valyrian steel like smoke trapped beneath ice. Its edge caught the candlelight without shining brightly. A weapon did not need to glitter to appear dangerous. Catelyn sat at Ned's right. Her auburn hair fell over one shoulder in a thick braid. Her blue eyes settled upon Johnathan the instant he entered. The version of Catelyn in Johnathan's memory disappeared. This woman was younger.

Sharper. More beautiful, but not softly so. Her suspicion had an edge. Robb stood beside the platform rather than sitting. He wore dark wool beneath boiled leather. Grey Wind was absent, likely kept away because the direwolf's reaction to Johnathan was uncertain. Robb looked like a boy trying to stand as a lord. The effort made him seem younger, not older.

Luwin walked ahead of the guards.

"My lord. My lady."

Ned's gaze moved to the rope.

"Did he resist?"

"No."

"Has he attempted escape?"

"No."

Johnathan looked at the walls.

"Technically."

Every face turned toward him. Luwin closed his eyes for a moment. Johnathan corrected himself.

"I tested whether my hand could enter stone. It could. I did not leave the room."

Ned's expression hardened.

"You can pass through the walls of Winterfell."

"I can pass part of myself through stone. I have not yet attempted an entire wall."

"Why not?"

"I am concerned about becoming solid in the middle."

Robb stared at him. Catelyn did not blink. Ned pointed toward the center of the hall.

“Bring him forward.”

Jory guided Johnathan toward the raised platform. The guards followed. Their boots echoed through the nearly empty room. Johnathan stopped several paces from Ice. The blade seemed darker up close. Ned noticed him looking.

“You know this sword.”

“Ice.”

Robb’s hand went to the hilt of his own sword. Catelyn leaned forward slightly. Ned’s voice remained level.

“How?”

Johnathan looked at the great blade.

“House Stark has carried a sword called Ice for thousands of years, though this particular blade is only about four centuries old. It was forged in Valyria before the Doom.”

No one spoke. Ned looked toward Luwin. The maester answered the unasked question.

“The age is known within the household and among learned men. Less commonly beyond the North.”

“I know more than commonly known things,” Johnathan said.

“That is why you are here,” Ned replied. Johnathan looked at Robb. The boy’s blue eyes were fixed upon him.

“Must he remain?”

Robb stiffened. Ned’s face gave away nothing.

“He is my heir.”

“He is also your son.”

“Those truths do not oppose each other.”

“Some of what I know concerns your children.”

“Then he should hear it.”

Johnathan glanced toward Catelyn. She understood the hesitation. Her voice was colder than Ned’s.

“You have already spoken the names of our children without being told them. You watched them from your tower. You

predicted Lord Arryn's death. You warned my husband that King Robert was coming before he read the king's letter."

She rested one hand upon the table.

"Now you stand beneath our roof and decide what my son should hear."

Johnathan lowered his eyes.

"No, my lady."

"Look at me."

He obeyed. Catelyn's gaze did not soften.

"If you know of danger to my children, you will speak it."

"I will."

"All of it."

"That may cause more danger."

Her hand tightened upon the table.

"Do not use my children as an excuse for more riddles."

Johnathan had seen that kind of fear before. Parents in emergency rooms often sounded angry when terror had nowhere else to go. Catelyn did not fear him only because he was unnatural. She feared the possibility that he knew something she did not. Knowledge about her children. There was no sharper weapon he could carry into this room. Johnathan bowed his head.

"I understand."

Ned spoke.

"Do you?"

"I am trying."

"Begin with your name."

"Doctor Johnathan Harrow."

"Doctor."

"A kind of healer."

"Luwin says you claim more than eight years of study."

"Yes."

"You possess no chain."

"My people prove education differently."

"Your people of Ohio."

“Yes.”

“Where is Ohio?”

“Inside a country called the United States, on a continent called North America, on a world called Earth.”

Robb frowned.

“A world.”

“Yes.”

Ned’s face remained still.

“You told Jory that Ohio was farther than Asshai.”

“It is not east or west of Asshai. It is not across any sea you know.”

“Then where?”

Johnathan looked around the hall. There was no gentle path through the answer.

“Somewhere beyond this world.”

Alyn muttered behind him.

“Madness.”

Ned raised one hand. The guard fell silent.

“You claim to have fallen from the heavens?”

“No.”

“To have crossed through the seven hells?”

“Hopefully not.”

“Then explain.”

“I cannot.”

Ned’s fingers touched the flat of Ice.

“You have known many answers since entering Winterfell. Yet whenever I ask how you came here, you retreat into ignorance.”

“Because I truly do not know.”

“You know my sword. My family. The contents of a royal message. The secret studies of my maester.”

Ned’s voice remained controlled.

“You claim ignorance only where proof would be useful.”

Johnathan drew a slow breath he did not need.

“I thought about telling you I was a prophet.”

Luwin's eyes narrowed. Johnathan continued.

"I considered calling myself a wizard or greenseer. Those explanations would be easier for you to understand."

"You are none of those things?"

"No."

"What are you?"

"A physician from Ohio who fell asleep while reading and awakened in the Wolfswood without a heartbeat."

Silence followed. Catelyn studied him. Robb appeared uncertain whether the answer was a joke. Ned did not appear amused.

"What were you reading?"

Johnathan met his eyes.

"This world."

The hall became very still. Ned leaned back slightly.

"Explain those words."

Johnathan felt the rope around his wrists. The rough wool against his skin. The cold stone beneath his borrowed boots. This was the moment he had imagined before entering the castle. In his imagination, the explanation had always sounded convincing. Now every possible version sounded like madness.

"In my world, Westeros is known through a series of books."

Robb glanced at Luwin. The maester stared only at Johnathan.

"Histories?" Catelyn asked.

"We believed they were stories."

"Written by whom?" Ned asked.

"A man named George."

"George of what house?"

"Martin."

Ned waited. Johnathan suspected that the full name would not improve matters.

"He was not a maester. Not exactly."

"You believe this Martin wrote the history of my house."

"Not history from our perspective. Fiction."

The word meant little to them. Johnathan tried again.

“A created tale. People and events invented for others to read.”

Robb’s face flushed.

“You call us inventions?”

“No.”

“You said a man created us.”

“I said that is what we believed.”

Catelyn rose. Her chair scraped across the stone.

“My children are not words in some foreigner’s book.”

“No.”

“They are flesh and blood.”

“I know.”

Her eyes flashed.

“Do you?”

Johnathan looked at Robb. He saw the boy who would one day wear a crown. He saw the body beneath Grey Wind’s head. The memory made his stomach turn even though his body did not need food.

“That is the first thing I learned after arriving.”

Catelyn remained standing. Johnathan continued.

“In my world, I could close the book. I could return to an earlier chapter and find your family together again. The deaths did not change between readings. The suffering stopped when the page ended.”

He looked toward the high windows.

“Then I came here and discovered that Winterfell continues when no one is reading.”

No one interrupted.

“The servants have names. The guards have families. Children laugh in courtyards that were never described. People become hungry between chapters. They grieve when the reader has moved on.”

Johnathan looked back at Catelyn.

“You are real. That means we were wrong about what the books were. Or I am inside something I cannot understand.”

Catelyn slowly sat. Ned's expression remained guarded.

"This Martin. Is he your god?"

Johnathan nearly laughed. The question was too close to one of his own private thoughts.

"No."

"You said he created the tale."

"He wrote it."

"What is the difference?"

Johnathan considered the old author in his cap, surrounded by conventions, side projects, novellas, and an ancient word processor.

"He was not its god. Its god, if the world had one at all, appeared to be an elderly man in a cap who refused most modern devices, remained devoted to an ancient word processor, and was frequently distracted by conventions and novellas."

Everyone stared at him. Johnathan cleared his throat.

"That sounded better in my head."

Robb looked toward his father.

"What is a word processor?"

"A machine used for writing."

Luwin's interest briefly overcame his suspicion.

"Like a printing press?"

"More complicated."

Ned placed one hand flat upon the table.

"Enough about machines."

"Agreed."

"You claim these books revealed the future."

"They revealed a future."

"The difference?"

"I have already changed events."

"How?"

"By being here."

"That proves nothing."

"Bran is still walking."

Catelyn went rigid. Robb took a step forward. Ned's hand closed around the hilt of Ice.

"What did you say?"

Johnathan's mouth became dry. He had promised facts first. Evidence. No dramatic speeches. He was doing poorly.

"In the future I read, Bran suffered a fall after King Robert reached Winterfell."

Catelyn stood again.

"From where?"

"The broken tower."

"When?"

"During the king's visit."

"How badly was he hurt?"

Johnathan looked at her.

"He survived."

"That was not my question."

"He lost the use of his legs."

The words struck the room harder than a shout. Catelyn's face drained of color. Robb's hand tightened around his sword hilt. Ned rose from the high seat. Ice remained upon the table, but his hand did not leave it.

"Who caused this fall?"

Johnathan hesitated. Ned's voice hardened.

"Who?"

"Ser Jaime Lannister."

Robb drew his sword. The guards behind Johnathan moved at once. Jory caught Robb's wrist before he could descend from the platform.

"My lord."

"Release me."

"Your father has not given an order."

Catelyn did not look at either of them.

"Why would the Kingslayer harm Bran?"

Johnathan turned toward her.

“Because Bran sees something Jaime cannot allow him to reveal.”

“What?”

Johnathan looked at Ned. This was the diagnosis. The part the family would not want to hear.

“Jaime and Queen Cersei together in the broken tower.”

Catelyn frowned.

“Together.”

Johnathan forced himself to speak plainly.

“As man and woman.”

Understanding reached her. Disgust followed. Then disbelief. Robb stared. Ned’s face became stone. Johnathan continued before fear could stop him.

“Cersei’s children were fathered by Jaime. Not King Robert.”

The words entered the Great Hall and seemed to remain there. Alyn whispered a prayer. Jory released Robb only after the boy lowered his sword. Luwin stood motionless. Ned descended from the platform. He did not bring Ice. That did not make his approach less threatening.

“You accuse the queen of incest and treason.”

“Yes.”

“You accuse a knight of the Kingsguard of attempting to murder my son.”

“Yes.”

“You accuse the royal children of bastardy.”

“Yes.”

“On the authority of a book written in another world.”

“Yes.”

Ned stopped directly before him. Johnathan could see grey beginning in his beard. The faint lines beside his eyes. The weariness left by Gared’s execution and Jon Arryn’s death.

“Do you understand what happens if such words leave this hall?”

“War.”

“Death.”

“Yes.”

“Not only yours.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

Ned’s voice remained low.

“Men will die by the thousands if the legitimacy of Robert’s heirs is challenged. Houses will choose sides. Lords will call their banners. The realm will burn.”

“That happens if no one acts.”

“According to your story.”

“Yes.”

Ned stepped even closer.

“And if your story is false?”

“Then I am a dangerous madman.”

“What punishment would your world give a man who made such accusations?”

“Depends on how much money he had.”

Ned stared at him. Johnathan sighed.

“Sorry.”

“You use humor whenever you are afraid.”

“I have had a lot of practice today.”

“Answer.”

“It would not be a crime to make the accusation by itself. But I would be expected to provide evidence.”

“What evidence do you offer me?”

“Jon Arryn’s investigation.”

Ned’s expression changed slightly. Johnathan saw it.

“The seed is strong,” he continued. “Jon Arryn was studying the great houses and their children. He looked at Robert’s acknowledged bastards. Every one has black hair.”

Luwin spoke.

“Baratheon black.”

“Yes.”

Johnathan looked toward the maester.

“Find the lineage book Jon Arryn was reading. Study every recorded marriage between Baratheons and Lannisters. The Baratheon traits dominate. Black hair. Blue eyes.”

Catelyn sat slowly.

“Joffrey has golden hair.”

“So do Myrcella and Tommen.”

Robb looked toward his father.

“Could three children favor their mother?”

“One could,” Luwin said. “Three would not prove impossibility.”

“No,” Johnathan agreed. “But Jon Arryn found more.”

“What?” Ned asked.

“He found Robert’s bastards.”

“How many?”

“I do not know the exact number he personally located. Robert fathered many. Gendry in King’s Landing. Mya Stone in the Vale. Barra will be born to a girl in a brothel. Edric Storm at Storm’s End.”

Ned’s eyes narrowed.

“Names.”

“Names you can verify.”

“And Jon Arryn died because of this?”

“Yes.”

“Poisoned by the Lannisters?”

Johnathan hesitated. This was where the old plot became more complicated.

“No.”

Ned’s face hardened.

“You accuse them of everything else.”

“Not this.”

“Who killed him?”

“His wife.”

Catelyn stood so quickly that the chair nearly fell.

“Lysa?”

“Yes.”

“You lie.”

“Petyr Baelish persuaded her.”

Catelyn’s expression changed at the name. Ned saw it. Johnathan continued carefully.

“Lysa will send a secret message accusing the Lannisters. She believes Petyr loves her. He uses that love to begin a conflict between your house and theirs.”

Catelyn stared at him.

“You know Petyr.”

“I know of him.”

“He was raised at Riverrun.”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“The books.”

Her face became unreadable. Johnathan felt suddenly cruel. He knew about Brandon’s duel. Petyr’s obsession. Lysa’s pregnancy. Hoster Tully’s decision. Secrets buried within one family that he had no right to scatter merely because he could.

Catelyn saw his hesitation.

“What else?”

“Enough to know the letter cannot be trusted.”

“What else do you know of my sister?”

Johnathan looked at Ned.

“Not here.”

Catelyn’s voice sharpened.

“You refuse me?”

“I refuse to expose every private wound I have read about merely to prove that I read it.”

“You speak as though silence is mercy.”

“Sometimes it is.”

Ned watched him. Something in his expression shifted. Only slightly. Johnathan wondered whether Ned heard the echo of his own choices. The promise. Jon. Fourteen years of silence justified as protection. Ned stepped away.

“Tell me about Gared.”

Johnathan had not expected the turn.

“The deserter?”

“The man I executed this morning.”

Johnathan looked toward Ice.

“He was not mad.”

“He deserted the Night’s Watch.”

“Yes.”

“He fled south.”

“Yes.”

“He spoke of dead men.”

“Because he saw them.”

Luwin frowned.

“Gared was stationed at Castle Black. Rangers vanish beyond the Wall every year.”

“He was with two men. Will, a former poacher and skilled tracker. Ser Waymar Royce, the youngest son of House Royce.”

Ned’s head turned toward Luwin.

“Do you know of this ranging?”

“No.”

Johnathan continued.

“Ser Waymar had been in the Watch less than half a year. He wore expensive black ringmail and a sable cloak. He led them north after a group of wildlings.”

Jory’s face changed.

“Royce.”

“You know the house.”

“Bronze Yohn’s son took the black.”

Ned looked back at Johnathan.

“What happened?”

“They found the wildlings dead beside a stream. No wounds. No obvious cause. Gared believed the cold killed them, but the Wall had been weeping. It was not cold enough.”

The Great Hall seemed colder as he spoke.

“Waymar ordered Gared to remain with the horses. He took Will to inspect the bodies.”

Johnathan remembered the prologue. Moonlight. Pale shapes.
The sword alive with blue light.

“The bodies were gone.”

Luwin’s eyes narrowed.

“Gone.”

“The Others were waiting.”

Alyn whispered behind him.

“Gods preserve us.”

Ned gave the guard a sharp glance. Johnathan continued.

“They were tall and gaunt. Flesh pale as milk. Their armor changed with the light. Their swords looked like crystal and carried a blue shimmer.”

Robb had forgotten to look like a lord. He looked fourteen again.

“Ser Waymar fought one.”

“You saw this in your book,” Ned said.

“Yes.”

“What happened to him?”

“His steel shattered when it struck the Other’s blade. They killed him.”

Ned’s face remained hard.

“And Will?”

“He hid in a tree. When he climbed down, Waymar rose.”

“Alive?”

“No.”

Johnathan looked at Luwin.

“His right eye burned blue. He strangled Will.”

The maester touched his chain unconsciously. Ned’s gaze moved toward Johnathan’s face.

“Your eyes are blue.”

“They are not burning ice. Luwin examined my pupils. They react to light. Wights rot. They are controlled. I am not.”

“You have no pulse,” Catelyn said.

“No.”

“No breath.”

“Not unless I choose.”

“Cold skin.”

“Yes.”

She looked toward the guards.

“And you expect us to believe you are unrelated to the dead beyond the Wall.”

“No. I expect you to consider the possibility that I am related somehow. I do not know what I am.”

The honesty unsettled them more than certainty would have. Ned returned to the platform.

“You warned me that Jon Arryn was dead before I read Robert’s letter.”

“Yes.”

“You knew why Robert was coming.”

“Yes.”

“You knew of Luwin’s attempt to light a glass candle.”

“Yes.”

Luwin’s mouth tightened.

“You know the details of a ranging that may be verified with Castle Black.”

“Yes.”

“You claim my son will be attacked during the king’s visit.”

“Yes.”

“You accuse the queen and her brother of treason.”

“Yes.”

Ned rested both hands upon the table.

“What else can you prove now?”

Johnathan looked at the rope around his wrists.

“This.”

He stopped concentrating on solidity. The fibers sank through his pale skin. Catelyn drew a sharp breath. The rope slid through both wrists and fell intact to the floor. The guards drew steel. Johnathan raised his empty hands.

“I am not attacking.”

“Do not move,” Jory warned. Johnathan looked toward the nearest stone pillar.

“I could have left the tower.”

“That is not reassuring,” Catelyn said.

“I chose not to.”

He walked toward the pillar. The guards followed. Johnathan placed one hand against the stone. He concentrated. His fingers faded. The granite became visible through them. He pushed forward.

His hand entered the pillar to the wrist. Robb whispered, “Seven hells.” Johnathan continued until half his forearm had vanished into solid stone. There was no pain. Only the strange awareness of density surrounding him. He withdrew slowly. His hand returned unharmed.

The skin became solid. Johnathan looked toward Ned.

“Your walls cannot hold me unless I agree to remain.”

Ned descended from the platform again.

“Then why remain?”

“Because running would make me your enemy.”

“You could pass through the outer wall.”

“Probably.”

“You could enter my chambers.”

“Yes.”

“My children’s rooms.”

The accusation cut deeper than the others. Johnathan met his eyes.

“Yes.”

Ned reached him.

“And what prevents you?”

“Me.”

“That is all?”

“That is all that prevents any powerful person from becoming a monster.”

Ned’s face remained hard. Johnathan continued.

"I could enter locked rooms. I could spy upon private conversations. I could steal, threaten, or kill without using the doors."

"You admit this freely."

"Because you need to understand the danger."

Catelyn's voice came from behind him.

"You are the danger."

"Yes."

Johnathan turned toward her.

"That is why I need rules before I convince myself that good intentions excuse everything."

She studied him.

"What rules?"

"I do not enter private rooms without permission unless someone's life is in immediate danger. I do not use what I know to humiliate people. I do not reveal secrets simply because I possess them. I do not force you to follow my advice."

Ned looked toward the fallen rope.

"And if we sentence you to die?"

"I leave."

"You would not submit to justice."

"I would not submit to an execution based on fear."

"I passed sentence on Gared this morning."

"He deserted. You followed the law you understood."

"You think me wrong."

"I think he deserved to be heard more carefully."

Ned's expression darkened. Johnathan continued before the man misunderstood.

"I am not condemning you. In the story I knew, no one believed him. You thought him mad. The Night's Watch itself barely believed in the Others."

"That does not restore his head."

"No."

The answer left a silence between them. Ned looked toward Ice. The blade waited upon the table.

“You wondered whether my sword could kill you.”

Johnathan felt something inside him tighten.

“Yes.”

“Can it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Would you remain solid if I struck?”

“I would attempt not to.”

“And if Valyrian steel touches whatever allows you to become mist?”

“I have no idea.”

Ned rested one hand upon Ice’s hilt. Johnathan took a step backward.

“Please do not conduct that experiment.”

Robb almost smiled. It vanished when Ned glanced toward him. Catelyn looked at Johnathan’s unmarked wrists.

“You said you would not reveal secrets merely because you know them.”

“Yes.”

“Yet you accused the queen in front of guards.”

Johnathan turned toward Jory, Alyn, and the others. She was right. He had asked for fewer witnesses. Then fear and urgency had driven the words from him anyway.

“Another mistake.”

Ned looked toward Jory.

“Captain.”

“My lord.”

“You and the guards will leave.”

Alyn stared.

“Lord Stark, ”

“You will speak of nothing heard in this hall.”

The men bowed. Jory looked at Johnathan.

“Will you remain?”

“Yes.”

“Your word?”

“My word.”

Jory did not appear satisfied. He obeyed anyway. The guards withdrew. The great doors closed behind them. Only Ned, Catelyn, Robb, Luwin, and Johnathan remained. Ned looked at Robb.

“You as well.”

Robb’s face tightened.

“I am your heir.”

“You are my son first.”

“You said I should hear him.”

“I have heard enough to change that judgment.”

Robb looked toward Johnathan.

“What happens to me?”

Johnathan wished he had not asked. Ned answered before Johnathan could.

“That is not your concern.”

“How can it not be?”

“Go.”

Robb remained for one breath longer. Then he bowed stiffly and walked from the hall. The doors closed again. Catelyn watched her eldest son leave.

“You frightened him.”

Ned looked toward Johnathan.

“He is not the only one.”

Johnathan picked up the rope. He placed it upon the nearest table.

“I am sorry.”

Ned returned to the high seat but did not sit.

“There is another secret.”

Johnathan froze. Catelyn’s gaze moved between them. Ned continued.

“You nearly spoke of it in the yard. You looked at Jon Snow as though you knew him. In your cell, you asked that certain matters be discussed privately.”

Johnathan said nothing.

“Do you know who his mother was?”

The Great Hall disappeared around him. Not literally. The walls remained. The candles burned. Steam whispered beneath the ancient stone. But the entire world narrowed to Ned Stark's face. Johnathan remembered Chapter Four.

He would not reveal Jon's parentage. He would not tell Catelyn. He would not tell Robb. He would not announce it in the Great Hall. He had already broken nearly every other rule he had made. He would keep this one.

"Yes."

Catelyn inhaled slowly. Ned descended from the platform once more. His hand did not touch Ice. That somehow made the moment more dangerous.

"Name her."

Johnathan shook his head.

"You claim knowledge as proof, then refuse when I ask."

"This truth belongs to you."

"You already possess it."

"That does not make it mine to reveal."

Ned stopped before him.

"What do you know?"

"Enough."

"Name her."

"No."

Catelyn stared at her husband. Ned's face had changed. Not much. To anyone who did not know him, perhaps not at all. But Johnathan saw fear beneath the anger. Not fear for himself. Fear for Jon. Catelyn saw it too.

"What is he protecting?" she asked. Ned did not look at her. Johnathan answered carefully.

"Jon Snow is not a danger to you or your children."

Catelyn's eyes flashed.

"That was not my question."

"It is the only answer I should give."

Ned seized the front of Johnathan's tunic. The movement was so fast that Johnathan did not react. Ned pulled him close.

“You arrived beneath my walls wearing the dragon. You speak of my children’s deaths. You accuse the queen. Now you hide behind honor while threatening a boy under my protection.”

“I am not threatening him.”

“Then speak.”

“No.”

Ned’s grip tightened. Johnathan could have become intangible. He remained solid. He looked directly into Ned’s grey eyes.

“You made a promise.”

Ned released him. The words struck with more force than any weapon. Catelyn went perfectly still. Luwin’s expression changed. Ned stepped backward. Johnathan kept his voice quiet.

“I will not say more.”

Ned stared at him.

“How?”

“I read it.”

“No one knows.”

“One man survived the tower with you.”

Johnathan regretted the line immediately.

“Howland Reed,” Ned whispered. Johnathan said nothing. Catelyn looked from one man to the other.

“What tower?”

Ned’s face closed. Johnathan turned toward her.

“Ask your husband when he is ready.”

Anger entered her expression. Johnathan did not retreat from it.

“He deserves to tell you. Jon deserves to hear the truth from the man he calls father. Not from a stranger using his life as evidence.”

Catelyn’s gaze remained sharp.

“You said Jon is not a danger to my children.”

“He loves them.”

“That does not answer what he is.”

“He is Jon.”

The words sounded insufficient. They were also true. Ned moved toward the table and placed both hands beside Ice. For several moments, he said nothing. When he spoke, his voice had become quiet.

“You will never speak of this outside my presence.”

“I will not.”

“Not to Jon.”

“No.”

“Not to Catelyn.”

Johnathan looked toward her.

“She already knows there is a secret.”

Ned closed his eyes. Catelyn’s face hardened.

“That is not his doing alone.”

Ned looked at her. Something old and painful passed between them. Fourteen years of distance. A bastard brought home from war. A name never spoken. A wound neither had been permitted to examine. Johnathan wished desperately that he were elsewhere.

He could have walked through the floor. He remained. Catelyn looked back at him.

“Does my husband’s secret place my children in danger?”

“No.”

“Does it threaten Robb’s inheritance?”

“No.”

The answer depended upon politics, legitimacy, and whether anyone pressed Jon’s possible claim. But as far as Winterfell was concerned, Jon did not threaten Robb.

“Does it concern the Iron Throne?”

Johnathan hesitated. Ned reached for Ice. Johnathan raised both hands.

“I am not answering.”

Catelyn looked at Ned. That was answer enough to deepen the mystery, though not enough to reveal it. Ned’s voice became harsh.

“This questioning is finished.”

“No,” Catelyn said. He turned toward her.

“My lady.”

“You summoned me because the stranger threatened our children. He has now given us warnings that may save Bran’s life.”

Her eyes remained on Ned.

“He has also revealed that you built our marriage around a secret large enough to make you afraid.”

“Catelyn.”

“I will not demand the answer before Luwin or this man.”

Her voice trembled only once.

“But you will not pretend nothing was said.”

Ned’s face looked older.

“I know.”

Johnathan lowered his hands. This was exactly what he had tried to avoid. He had not spoken Lyanna’s name. He had still driven a blade into their marriage. Knowledge could injure without being fully revealed. Luwin stepped between the silence.

“My lord, there are matters requiring immediate action.”

Ned looked at him.

“The boy Bran,” Luwin continued. “The broken tower. The alleged ranging. Lord Arryn’s investigation.”

Duty returned to Ned’s expression. It did not remove the pain. It merely gave him somewhere to place it. He looked at Johnathan.

“Is Bran in danger before the king arrives?”

“Not from the event I remember.”

“Could your presence change that?”

“Yes.”

The honesty angered Catelyn.

“You cannot know.”

“No.”

“Then how do we protect him?”

“Keep him from climbing the broken tower. Better, keep him from climbing alone anywhere until the royal party leaves.”

Catelyn’s mouth tightened.

“You have not tried telling Bran not to climb.”

“I watched him measure walls from my cell. I understand the difficulty.”

Despite everything, Luwin almost smiled. Ned did not.

“Jory will place men around the broken tower.”

“Do not make the reason public,” Johnathan warned. “If Jaime and Cersei know you suspect them, they may change their plans.”

Ned’s gaze hardened.

“You continue speaking their names as though guilt is proven.”

“It is not proven to you.”

“To you?”

“Yes.”

Ned considered the difference.

“What should I do when Robert arrives?”

“Do not accuse anyone.”

Catelyn looked surprised.

“You just accused them.”

“Inside a closed hall. Public accusation would start the war before you possess evidence.”

Ned slowly nodded.

“Continue.”

“Welcome Robert. Watch the Lannisters. Keep Bran safe. Find the lineage book Jon Arryn studied. Ask Robert about his bastards without telling him why.”

“Robert has little interest in them.”

“That is part of the problem.”

“What of the Handship?”

“Refuse it.”

Ned’s expression tightened.

“The king has not asked.”

“He will.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Robert will be angry. He may attempt to command you.”

“He is my king.”

“He is also your friend. Use that while it remains true.”

Ned looked toward the royal letter resting near Ice.

“What happens if I accept?”

Johnathan could see the path. The kingsroad south. Sansa’s dreams. Arya’s fear. Bran unconscious. Catelyn seizing Tyrion. Jaime’s attack in the street.

Robert’s boar. The throne room. Ice descending.

“You discover the truth.”

“That sounds necessary.”

“You confront Cersei after Robert is mortally wounded.”

Catelyn gripped the arms of her chair.

“How does Robert die?”

“A boar during a hunt.”

Ned’s brow furrowed.

“Robert has hunted boar since he was a boy.”

“He is given stronger wine than he realizes. He is too drunk when the animal charges.”

“By whom?”

“His squire, Lancel Lannister, under Cersei’s influence.”

Ned’s face darkened.

“You confront the queen before securing the children or the city. You warn her to flee because you do not wish Robert to kill her children.”

“That sounds like my husband,” Catelyn said bitterly. Ned gave her a sharp glance. Johnathan continued.

“Cersei uses the warning to prepare. Littlefinger promises you the City Watch. He betrays you.”

Ned’s eyes narrowed.

“You have accused Baelish twice.”

“He places a knife beneath your chin in the throne room.”

Catelyn’s face paled.

“What happens to Eddard?”

Johnathan did not answer. She stood.

“What happens?”

Ned looked at Johnathan. He knew. Perhaps not the details. But he saw the answer in Johnathan’s silence. Catelyn crossed the distance between them.

“Tell me.”

“He is imprisoned.”

“And then?”

Johnathan looked toward Ice. The dark blade rested upon the table.

“They execute him.”

Catelyn’s breath caught. Ned did not move. Luwin lowered his head. The Great Hall became silent enough that Johnathan heard the candles burning. Catelyn’s voice came quietly.

“Who?”

“Joffrey gives the order.”

“He is a child.”

“He becomes king after Robert dies.”

“He is not Robert’s son,” Ned said.

“No.”

“Then Stannis is the lawful heir.”

“Yes.”

The certainty came easily. Stannis. The man who would grind his teeth beneath the weight of justice. The man Jon Arryn had intended to approach. The man who already suspected the truth.

“Jon Arryn investigated with Stannis,” Johnathan said. “Stannis left King’s Landing after Jon died because he feared he would be next.”

Ned looked toward the letter.

“Where is he now?”

“Dragonstone.”

“Will he answer a raven?”

“Not one openly accusing the queen. The message may be intercepted.”

Luwin spoke.

“A trusted rider?”

“Possibly. But first, verify what you can.”

Ned considered that. Catelyn had not moved. She stared at her husband as though she had just watched a shadow pass over his grave.

“Do not go south,” she said. Ned looked at her.

“The king has not asked.”

“He will.”

“I know.”

“No.”

Her voice broke.

“You know because the stranger says so. You know what Robert will ask. You know what waits if you accept.”

Ned looked toward Johnathan.

“And yet the death of Jon Arryn demands answers.”

“You can investigate from here,” Johnathan said. “Send people you trust. Write Stannis carefully. Find Robert’s bastards through merchants, guards, and quiet inquiries. You do not need to place your head inside the lion’s mouth.”

“My place may be beside my king.”

“Your place is where you can serve the realm without leaving your children exposed.”

The words landed sharply. Ned’s eyes hardened. Johnathan did not withdraw them.

“You asked what happens. I am telling you.”

Ned walked toward him.

“You judge my choices before I have made them.”

“I watched where they led.”

“In a story.”

“In a future where you acted exactly as honor demanded and everyone around you used that honor against you.”

Ned stopped. Johnathan lowered his voice.

“I do not want you to become dishonorable. I want you to stop assuming your enemies will obey rules they despise.”

Catelyn watched her husband. Luwin watched Johnathan. Ned's expression revealed almost nothing.

After a long silence, he asked, "Does Robb die?" Johnathan closed his eyes. He should have expected the question. Catelyn gripped the table.

"Do not."

Ned did not look away from Johnathan.

"Answer."

Johnathan opened his eyes.

"In the future I knew, yes."

Catelyn sat heavily. Ned's face remained still.

"How?"

"I will not tell you today."

Ned's anger returned.

"You have no right to refuse."

"I have every reason."

"He is my son."

"And telling you the exact place, people, and betrayal may cause you to build every decision around avoiding one death while creating another."

"You warned us of Bran."

"Because the danger is immediate and preventable."

"Robb's is not?"

"It is years away and depends upon a war that has not begun."

Catelyn pressed one hand against her mouth.

"Years."

"Yes."

"What of the others?"

Johnathan looked at her. She understood before he answered. Every mother would ask. Arya. Sansa. Bran. Rickon.

He could tell her. He could describe Sansa's captivity. Arya's wandering. Bran beyond the Wall. Rickon hidden on Skagos. He could fill her mind with nightmares that would poison every moment she spent with them.

"No."

Catelyn's hand lowered.

"You will tell me."

"I will warn you when warning can help."

"You expect me to accept that?"

"No."

Johnathan's voice softened.

"But I am asking you to."

Tears had gathered in her eyes. They did not fall.

"You speak of my children's deaths and ask for trust."

"Yes."

"Why should I give it?"

"Because I could have escaped."

The answer surprised everyone. Johnathan continued.

"I could have vanished into the Wolfswood. I could have entered Winterfell unseen and interfered without permission. Instead, I surrendered."

"You did not know what you were then," Ned said.

"I know more now."

Johnathan turned toward the nearest wall.

"I could leave this hall before anyone reached the door."

"Do not," Luwin said.

"I am not going to."

He faced Catelyn again.

"I stayed because I do not trust myself to save your family alone."

That silenced her. Johnathan looked at Ned.

"I know events. I do not understand every cause. I know people as they appeared in a story, not as they truly are. I carry information without wisdom."

He glanced at the rope upon the table.

"I need people who know this world. Its laws. Its roads. Its customs. Its consequences."

"You need us," Luwin said.

"Yes."

Ned's eyes narrowed.

“And what do you expect in return?”

“Shelter. Clothing. Information. Permission to help.”

“No lands?”

“No.”

“Gold?”

“I do not need it yet.”

“A title?”

“No.”

“Then what do you want?”

Johnathan looked toward the high windows. Snow had begun falling again. Light flakes drifted past the narrow glass.

“I want the tragedy not to happen.”

Ned’s expression remained hard.

“That is not an answer a lord can bargain with.”

“It is the only one I have.”

“No man crosses worlds without desire.”

“I had a life.”

The words came more sharply than Johnathan intended.

“A home. A woman I loved. Patients. Work. Electricity. Coffee. Indoor plumbing.”

No one understood the final three. They understood the grief.

“I did not ask to come here.”

Johnathan looked at his cold hands.

“I do not know whether my body is dead beside her. I do not know whether she woke and found an empty bed or a corpse.”

His voice weakened.

“I do not know whether I can ever return.”

The hall blurred. Johnathan blinked. A tear moved down his cheek. His body did not breathe unless commanded. It did not beat. It did not hunger. It could still cry.

That seemed unnecessarily cruel. Johnathan wiped the tear away.

“When I realized where I was, I thought knowledge made me powerful. Then I saw your children laughing in the yard.”

He looked at Catelyn.

“They were younger than I remembered. Robb was not a king. Jon was not a commander. Bran was walking. Arya still had both hands clean. Sansa still believed songs were kind.”

Catelyn’s face changed.

“Rickon?”

“Three years old and probably committing violence against furniture.”

A weak sound escaped her. Almost a laugh. Almost a sob. Johnathan continued.

“They were not characters. They were children.”

He looked toward the doors through which Robb had left.

“I cannot return home today. Perhaps I never will. But I am here before the worst begins.”

Ned’s gaze remained upon him.

“You believe you were sent.”

“I do not know.”

“By your god?”

“I was not particularly religious.”

“By ours?”

“They have not introduced themselves.”

“You make light of everything.”

“No. Only the things that frighten me.”

Ned understood that answer. He looked toward Ice. For a long time, no one spoke. Then he sat upon the high seat.

“Maester Luwin.”

“My lord.”

“Send a raven to Castle Black.”

Luwin nodded.

“Ask Lord Commander Mormont whether Ser Waymar Royce departed on a ranging with men named Will and Gared.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Ask whether any word has returned.”

Luwin inclined his head.

“Send another message to Benjen.”

Johnathan looked up. Ned continued.

“Tell him Robert is riding north and that I require his counsel. Say nothing of our prisoner.”

“Yes, my lord.”

That fit the story. Benjen would come. But not today. Not in time to make this interrogation easier. Ned looked toward Catelyn.

“Bran will be watched.”

“By whom?”

“Jory. Harwin. Men we trust.”

“He will hate it.”

“He may hate me while walking.”

Catelyn nodded. Ned looked back at Johnathan.

“The broken tower will be barred.”

“Bran climbs walls.”

“Then the stones near its base will be guarded.”

“Good.”

“You will remain in Winterfell.”

Johnathan waited.

“As a prisoner?”

Ned considered him.

“Not in the tower.”

Catelyn’s eyes sharpened. Ned continued.

“You will be given a chamber in the Great Keep.”

“My lord,” Luwin said carefully.

“If walls cannot contain him, a cell serves no purpose beyond insult.”

“That is surprisingly reasonable,” Johnathan said. Ned ignored him.

“Two guards will remain outside.”

“Reasonable with a little insult.”

“You will not pass through any wall, door, floor, roof, person, or animal without my permission.”

Johnathan blinked.

“The inclusion of animals feels specific.”

“I was told about the wolf.”

“The wolf passed through me.”

“You will still avoid it.”

“Agreed.”

“You will not approach my children alone.”

Johnathan hesitated. Ned noticed.

“Is that unacceptable?”

“No. There may be moments when immediate danger, ”

“Then you will act to save a life and explain afterward.”

Johnathan nodded.

“That is fair.”

“You will not speak of the queen, Jaime Lannister, the royal children, Lord Arryn’s murder, or Jon Snow outside the people in this hall.”

“Robb heard part of it.”

“I will speak to Robb.”

“Jory and the guards heard the accusations.”

“They are my men.”

“Men gossip.”

Ned’s mouth tightened.

“Not after I speak with them.”

Johnathan believed him. Ned continued.

“You will answer Luwin’s questions and submit to examination so long as he does not harm you without consent.”

Luwin glanced toward the bent needle in his memory. Johnathan nodded.

“I appreciate the last part.”

“You will tell me before revealing another future danger.”

“That may not always be possible.”

“When possible.”

“Agreed.”

“You will not use knowledge of my family to threaten or command me.”

“I never intended to.”

“Intentions have already caused enough harm.”

Johnathan accepted the rebuke.

“Yes.”

Catelyn looked at her husband.

“You trust him?”

“No.”

The answer came immediately. Johnathan appreciated it. Ned looked toward him.

“But I believe he knows things he should not know. I believe Bran may be in danger. I believe Jon Arryn’s death deserves investigation.”

He rested one hand upon Ice.

“And I believe killing a man because I fear what I cannot explain would make me less than the law I claim to serve.”

Johnathan released a breath.

“Thank you.”

“Do not thank me yet.”

“Fair.”

Catelyn remained troubled.

“What shall the household be told?”

Ned considered the question.

“A traveler from the east.”

Johnathan lifted one hand.

“Technically inaccurate.”

Ned gave him a long look.

“A traveler from very far east.”

“Acceptable.”

“A healer under my protection while Luwin examines his condition.”

“Better than demon.”

“You will not encourage rumors of sorcery.”

Johnathan looked at his hand.

“What happens when someone sees me walk through a door?”

“You will use the door.”

“Right.”

Luwin gathered his leather case.

“I will require more blood tests.”

"I do not appear to have circulating blood."

"Then we will discover what is inside you."

"That sentence is more threatening than you intended."

"I intended some of it."

Ned looked at Catelyn.

"My lady, remain."

She understood. The unfinished secret waited between them.

Johnathan looked toward the doors.

"May I leave?"

"In a moment."

Ned rose and approached him one final time. The lord of Winterfell stopped close enough that Johnathan could see his reflection faintly within Ned's grey eyes.

"You said your story is no longer certain."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because Bran did not fall when I expected him to."

"The king has not arrived."

"No, but I warned you before the event. That alone changes your choices. The future I know depended on no one knowing."

Ned considered that.

"What else has changed?"

"You met me."

"That may not be an improvement."

"Strong possibility."

Ned almost smiled. It disappeared quickly.

"If the future can change, then your knowledge weakens each day."

"Yes."

"That troubles you."

"Terrifies me."

"Why?"

"Because right now I know where the disasters are."

Johnathan looked toward the windows.

“Once events bend far enough, I become a doctor treating a disease that no longer follows the textbook.”

Luwin seemed to approve of the comparison. Ned did not fully understand it, but he understood enough.

“What do you do then?”

“Observe. Test assumptions. Admit when I am wrong.”

“And when lives depend upon you?”

“Make the best decision possible with the evidence available.”

Ned nodded once. That answer belonged to a healer. It also belonged to a lord. Johnathan glanced toward Ice.

“May I ask something?”

“You have asked many things without permission.”

“Can Valyrian steel kill the Others?”

Ned looked down at the greatsword.

“You tell me.”

“The books never gave a complete answer. Dragonglass kills them. Valyrian steel probably can.”

“Probably.”

“The story was unfinished.”

A flicker of disbelief crossed Catelyn’s face.

“The man who wrote your future did not finish it?”

“No.”

“How long did your people wait?”

“Fifteen years since the last main book.”

Luwin frowned.

“A slow writer.”

“You have no idea.”

Ned looked at Ice differently.

“What happens when the Others come south?”

“The Wall falls.”

No humor remained in Johnathan’s voice.

“The dead move against the living. Every war over crowns becomes meaningless.”

“When?”

“I do not know exactly. Years, not decades.”

“How many?”

“Perhaps two. Perhaps more. Time in the books was not always clear.”

Ned’s gaze moved north, though the walls of the hall blocked the view.

“The Night’s Watch has fewer than a thousand men.”

“I know.”

“Benjen writes that rangers are vanishing.”

“I know.”

“Gared was the fourth deserter this year.”

“I know.”

Ned looked at him again.

“This is why you warned me.”

“Yes.”

“Not only Robert.”

“No.”

“What must be done?”

“Strengthen the Watch. Gather dragonglass. Stop wasting men on wars that do not matter.”

“The Iron Throne matters to every lord in the realm.”

“It will not matter to a corpse.”

Ned’s eyes hardened. Johnathan did not apologize.

“The wars begin because the succession is false. Prevent that war or shorten it. Unite the realm before the dead move.”

“Under whom?”

Johnathan hesitated. The question had destroyed readers for decades. Stannis had the lawful claim. Daenerys had dragons. Jon had blood and perhaps legitimacy. Renly had armies. Robb never wanted the southern crown.

Every answer carried death.

“Under the living.”

Ned frowned.

“That is not an answer.”

“It is the most important part.”

“Who sits the Iron Throne?”

“Stannis possesses the lawful claim after Robert.”

“Possesses.”

“Yes.”

“You do not sound pleased.”

“Stannis is hard. Unbending. But he understands duty and believes the threat when shown proof.”

“Then we warn him.”

“Carefully.”

Ned nodded. The decision was not complete. It had begun. Johnathan felt the future shift. Not dramatically. No thunder. No magical wind.

Only Eddard Stark deciding that a letter might be written, a tower might be guarded, and a brother might be summoned. Small decisions. The kind that changed everything. Ned turned toward the closed doors.

“Jory.”

The doors opened almost immediately. The captain had been waiting outside. He entered with two guards but kept his hand away from his sword.

“Take Doctor Harrow to a chamber in the Great Keep.”

Jory’s eyebrows rose.

“Not the tower?”

“No.”

Alyn stared past him from the doorway. Ned continued.

“He is under my protection.”

Johnathan looked toward Catelyn.

“Does that make me a guest?”

“No,” Ned and Luwin answered together. Johnathan nodded.

“Worth checking.”

Ned’s expression remained severe.

“You will be given food, clothing, and a guarded chamber. You will earn trust before claiming guest right.”

“Trust first. Salt second.”

Luwin glanced at him. Johnathan smiled faintly.

“I was listening.”

Jory approached. He looked toward Johnathan's free wrists.

"Where is the rope?"

"On the table."

Jory found it. The knot remained tied. He looked back at Johnathan.

"You passed through it."

"Yes."

"Will you submit to another?"

Johnathan considered the question.

"No."

Alyn's hand went to his sword. Johnathan raised one hand.

"I am not escaping. But binding me accomplishes nothing except making everyone pretend the rope has authority."

Jory looked toward Ned. The lord of Winterfell considered this.

"Leave him unbound."

Alyn looked horrified. Catelyn looked uncertain. Jory simply nodded.

"As you command."

Johnathan walked toward the doors. He stopped beside Robb's abandoned position. The boy was somewhere outside, perhaps demanding answers from a guard who would not give them. Johnathan had told Robb that his brother would fall, his father would die, and that something terrible waited in his own future. Not directly. Enough. He had entered the hall intending to control his words.

He had failed repeatedly. Yet Bran would be guarded. Ned would not travel south blindly. Castle Black would receive questions about Waymar Royce. Perhaps that was the best any person could do. Fail imperfectly in a useful direction. Johnathan reached the doors.

"Doctor Harrow."

Ned's voice stopped him. Johnathan looked back. Eddard Stark stood beside Ice. Catelyn remained seated behind him, grief, suspicion, and anger gathering around her like a second

cloak. Luwin held the impossible pajamas and watched as though Johnathan were a question the Citadel had failed to imagine. Ned looked toward the high windows. Snow moved beyond the glass.

“You know the words of my house.”

Johnathan nodded.

“Winter is coming.”

“Every child in the North knows them.”

“In your world as well?”

“Yes.”

Ned’s gaze returned to him.

“What did they mean in your story?”

Johnathan thought of the Others moving through the haunted forest. Ser Waymar’s sword breaking.

Dead eyes opening blue. The Wall standing above a world too busy fighting itself to look north.

“They meant everyone was warned.”

Ned waited.

“And almost no one listened.”

The lord of Winterfell looked toward Ice. Johnathan continued.

“The winter behind your words is already awake.”

The candles trembled in a draft. No one spoke. Jory guided Johnathan from the Great Hall. The doors closed behind them. Inside, Eddard Stark remained beside his ancient sword, facing a future that had become both less certain and more dangerous. Outside, Winterfell continued preparing for a king. Servants carried wine into the cellars.

Smiths repaired shoes for horses that had not yet arrived. Cooks argued over stores. Children chased direwolves through snow-covered yards. Bran Stark stood beneath a wall, studying the stones above him.

Then Jory Cassel crossed the yard and called his name. Bran turned. For the first time in the history Johnathan remembered, someone was watching before the boy began to climb.

The story had changed. The reckoning had begun.

CHAPTER 6

THE STAG, THE DRAGON, AND THE WOLF

The doors of the Great Hall closed behind Johnathan. The sound followed him into the passage. Heavy wood striking stone. The end of the interrogation. Or perhaps merely the end of its first consequences. Jory Cassel walked at Johnathan's left. Two guards followed several paces behind them, hands resting near their swords. No one carried rope.

That small absence mattered. Johnathan's wrists remained free. His movements did not. He glanced over his shoulder at the doors. Beyond them, Eddard and Catelyn Stark remained with a secret Johnathan had nearly exposed, warnings he had delivered without mercy, and a future that had already begun departing from the one he remembered. Maester Luwin was still inside as well, holding the folded black-and-red pajamas beneath one arm. Johnathan wished he had remembered to ask whether the buttons were safe.

He immediately recognized how absurd that concern was. He had accused the queen of treason, described the murder of Jon Arryn, warned that Robert would die, told Ned that the Others were returning, and confirmed that he knew the secret surrounding Jon Snow. Yet he remained worried about plastic buttons. Human priorities were remarkably stubborn.

"You are thinking too loudly," Jory said. Johnathan looked at him.

"I didn't say anything."

"You have the face of a man arguing with himself."

"Who appears to be winning?"

"Neither of you."

Johnathan nodded.

"That feels accurate."

They continued along the narrow passage connecting the Great Hall with the inner yard. The walls were built from dark granite. Torchlight moved across the stone, catching within shallow cracks before disappearing into ancient mortar. Johnathan knew he could place his hand through the wall. He could probably step sideways and vanish from Jory's sight. The thought came automatically now. Every locked door had become optional. Every wall had become a suggestion.

That did not make walking through one wise. Johnathan had already agreed to rules. He would use doors. He would not enter private chambers. He would not approach the Stark children alone. He would not reveal future dangers without first bringing them to Ned whenever circumstances allowed. Most importantly, he would not confuse the power to act with the right to act.

The distinction seemed simple. He suspected it would become increasingly difficult. Jory opened the outer door. Cold daylight flooded the passage. Winterfell had changed while Johnathan stood before the Starks. Not physically. The same towers rose beneath the pale northern sky. Steam continued drifting from channels warmed by the springs below the castle. Smoke rolled from chimneys and flattened beneath the clouds.

But the king was coming. That knowledge had entered every yard and corridor. Servants hurried between buildings with baskets, bedding, bundles of rushes, and armfuls of firewood. Men hauled benches from storerooms while women followed them, arguing about where each one belonged. Carts creaked across the yard carrying grain, salted meat, wine casks, lamp oil, and candles. Men climbed ladders to inspect roofs. Banners were unfolded beneath covered walkways and beaten clean. From the smithy came the steady ringing of iron.

Horses stamped within the stables as empty stalls were cleared for the royal party. Johnathan stopped beneath the doorway.

"How long until Robert arrives?"

"The letter gave no exact day."

“Approximately.”

“A fortnight, perhaps. Longer if his wagons slow him.”

Johnathan remembered the royal procession from the book. Hundreds of riders. Knights and squires. Servants and wagons. Three royal children. Two Lannister brothers. A king who missed the man he had once been.

A queen carrying enough secrets to destroy the realm.

“So we have time.”

Jory looked at him.

“For what?”

“To make our mistakes more slowly.”

“That would be an improvement.”

They stepped into the yard. People noticed Johnathan immediately. The rough grey wool removed the dragons from his appearance, but it did not make him ordinary. His skin remained unnaturally pale. His dark curls fell around a face that looked bloodless in the northern light. He walked through the cold without shivering. No mist came from his mouth. A dog beneath a cart began to growl. Its owner dragged it away by the collar.

Another animal flattened its ears and refused to cross Johnathan’s path. A woman carrying folded sheets pressed herself against a wall to let him pass. Two kitchen servants stared from beneath a covered walkway. One whispered, “That is him.”

“The dragon ghost?”

Johnathan looked toward Jory.

“Dragon ghost?”

“The name has spread.”

“I have been here less than one day.”

“This is a castle.”

“Hospital gossip was slower.”

Jory did not ask what a hospital was. That was becoming one of his better qualities. A young servant ran between them carrying fresh rushes. Jory caught the boy by the shoulder before he collided with Johnathan. The child looked up. His eyes widened. Johnathan raised one hand.

“Hello.”

The boy screamed, dropped half the rushes, and fled. Johnathan watched him disappear between two buildings.

“That went well.”

“You should stop attempting to reassure people.”

“I used one word.”

“You used it while looking like a corpse.”

“That is difficult to correct.”

Jory motioned for the servant’s abandoned rushes to be gathered. Then he looked across the yard.

“Bran!”

Johnathan followed his gaze. Bran Stark stood beneath an outer staircase with Summer beside him. The boy had been studying the wall above the steps. His head tilted backward. His eyes moved across stones and handholds with the practiced attention of someone planning a route. Harwin stood nearby. Bran turned when Jory called. Summer noticed Johnathan first.

The direwolf pup became rigid. Grey fur rose along his back, and a low growl emerged from his small body. Bran placed one hand upon the wolf’s shoulders.

“He does not like you.”

“Most animals don’t.”

“Why?”

“I wish I knew.”

Jory stopped before him.

“Your father gave an order.”

Bran’s face tightened.

“Harwin told me.”

“No climbing.”

“Not the broken tower.”

“No towers.”

Bran looked toward Harwin.

“You said the broken tower.”

“I said your lord father forbade you to climb.”

“The covered bridge is not a tower.”

“It is high enough.”

“So are the walls.”

“You are not climbing those either.”

Bran stared at Jory as though the captain had personally betrayed generations of Stark tradition.

“When may I climb again?”

“When your father permits it.”

“That could be forever.”

“Then you will live long enough to complain about it.”

Johnathan looked away before Bran noticed his reaction. Alive long enough to complain. That was exactly the bargain. Bran noticed Johnathan’s grey clothing.

“You are the man from the tower.”

“Yes.”

“The dead man.”

“I prefer doctor.”

“What is a doctor?”

“A kind of healer.”

Bran examined him.

“You do not look like a healer.”

“I don’t have the proper costume.”

Jory gave him a warning glance. Johnathan corrected himself.

“These are healer clothes where I come from.”

“They look like servant clothes.”

“They may be both.”

Bran’s attention moved to Johnathan’s wrists.

“Where are the ropes?”

“Lord Stark decided they were unnecessary.”

Harwin spoke before thinking.

“He escaped them.”

Jory turned sharply. Harwin’s expression changed. Bran’s eyes widened.

“How?”

Johnathan looked at Jory. The captain’s face provided the correct answer.

“Ask your father when you are older.”

“That is what people say when they do not want to answer.”

“That is because it works.”

Bran stepped closer. Summer resisted, digging his paws into the stones. Johnathan remained where he was. The boy looked so much younger from this distance. Seven years old. Thin. Bright-eyed.

Annoyed. Standing upon both legs. Johnathan’s memory tried to replace him with another image. A broken child beneath a tower. A mother beside his bed. A direwolf howling in the night. He forced the image away.

That had not happened. It might never happen. Bran followed his gaze upward.

“Do you climb?”

“Not usually.”

“Are you afraid of heights?”

“No.”

“Then why not?”

“I come from a place with laws against climbing important buildings.”

Bran frowned.

“Why?”

“Because people fall.”

“I do not.”

The certainty belonged completely to a seven-year-old. Johnathan remembered patients who had spoken the same way. Young men who did not need helmets. Workers who did not need safety harnesses. People who had survived a dangerous act a hundred times and believed repetition had transformed danger into safety.

“Everyone who falls believes they will not,” Johnathan said. “Right until they do.”

Bran’s expression hardened.

“You sound like Luwin.”

“I am sorry.”

Harwin hid a smile. Bran did not. Johnathan looked at Summer. No voice entered his mind. No thoughts. No magical impression. Only posture.

Raised fur. Rigid shoulders. Weight placed forward. An animal's warning was easy to understand without sorcery.

"Summer is protecting you," Johnathan said.

"He always will."

Johnathan hoped that was true. Jory gestured toward the Great Keep.

"We must go."

Bran looked at Johnathan once more.

"Did Father release you because you are a healer?"

"Partly."

"What is the other part?"

Jory's hand settled near his sword. Johnathan chose carefully.

"Your father decided he needed more time to judge me."

Bran accepted that. For now. Jory led Johnathan away. He looked back once. Bran remained beneath the staircase, angry and curious. Most importantly, he remained on the ground. For the first time in the future Johnathan remembered, someone had begun watching before the boy climbed.

The change felt small. It was not. Near the armory, Robb waited with Grey Wind. Unlike Bran, Robb did not pretend his presence was accidental. The heir to Winterfell stood with one hand near the sword at his hip. Grey Wind sat beside him, pale eyes fixed upon Johnathan. Jory stopped.

"My lord."

Robb looked past him.

"I wish to speak with Doctor Harrow."

"Your father ordered him taken to his chamber."

"I am my father's heir."

"And I am his captain."

Robb's jaw tightened. Jory's voice softened slightly.

"You may walk with us."

Robb accepted the compromise. He joined them as they crossed the yard. Grey Wind followed at his side. Johnathan looked at the pup.

“He is less afraid of me than the dogs.”

“He is not a dog.”

“I know.”

“You knew about the wolves before you saw them.”

“Yes.”

“From your books.”

“Yes.”

Robb looked ahead.

“You told my father that Bran would be hurt.”

“I told him what happened in the future I remembered.”

“You accused Ser Jaime Lannister.”

Johnathan glanced at the servants passing nearby. Jory noticed.

“Lower your voices.”

Robb obeyed.

“Ser Jaime is one of the greatest knights in the Seven Kingdoms.”

“That does not make him a good man.”

“You have never met him.”

“No.”

“Then how can you judge him?”

Johnathan considered the question. He knew Jaime from different points in a life the man had not yet lived. The Kingslayer who had pushed Bran. The captive who lost a hand. The knight who had saved an entire city while allowing everyone to believe him without honor. Those were not separate people. They were also not the same man at the same moment.

“He committed a terrible act in the future I remember,” Johnathan answered. “That does not mean I understand everything he is.”

Robb looked toward him.

“That is not how you spoke in the hall.”

"I spoke too confidently."

"Were you wrong?"

"Not about what he did."

"Then what?"

"About treating knowledge of one action as knowledge of an entire person."

Robb considered that.

"You still believe he would hurt Bran."

"Yes."

"But Bran has not been hurt."

"No."

"Then Ser Jaime has done nothing."

"Not here."

"Not yet," Robb said bitterly. Johnathan nodded.

"Not yet."

Robb stepped into his path. Jory raised one arm between them. Robb ignored him.

"You speak as though my brother has already fallen."

"In my memory, he had."

"Bran is not a memory."

"No."

Johnathan looked back toward the staircase.

"That is why I warned you."

Some of Robb's anger weakened. Not all.

"My father sent me from the hall."

"He did."

"My mother looked as though someone had died."

Johnathan said nothing.

"What did you tell them after I left?"

"That is for your father to decide."

Robb's hand tightened near his sword.

"You have decided enough for my family."

"Yes."

The answer surprised the boy. Johnathan continued.

"I decided what to reveal. I decided when. I decided frightening all of you would make you listen."

His voice lowered.

"I made mistakes."

Robb studied him.

"Does my father die?"

The question struck harder than any blow Johnathan had received since arriving. He could answer. He had already told Ned and Catelyn. One word could confirm Robb's fear. A description could poison every remaining moment the boy spent with his father.

"Your father is alive today."

Robb's eyes narrowed.

"That is not what I asked."

"It is the answer that matters."

"What happens to him?"

"I will not tell you."

"You told my mother."

"I should not have."

Robb's anger flared.

"You think being impossible makes you brave?"

"No."

"You think my father's protection makes you safe?"

"No."

"Then why refuse me?"

"Because your father is alive."

Johnathan held the boy's gaze.

"You have years ahead of you that have not happened. Every warning changes what comes next. I will not fill your mind with an image of your father's death when he may now live long enough to become a miserable old man who complains about his knees."

"My father does not complain."

"He will when he is old."

"You do not know that."

“No.”

Robb’s expression shifted.

“That may be the first sensible thing you have said.”

Johnathan nearly smiled. He decided against it. Robb looked toward Bran.

“Can we prevent the fall?”

“I believe so.”

“Then Bran will be safe.”

“From that fall.”

Robb turned sharply.

“What does that mean?”

“It means stopping one danger does not remove every danger in the world.”

“You enjoy speaking in riddles.”

“I hate it.”

“You use enough of them.”

“Because plain answers can make frightened people do terrible things.”

Grey Wind approached Johnathan. The direwolf’s nose moved as he tested the air. Johnathan remained still. The pup came within two steps. His ears moved backward. A low rumble vibrated through his chest. Robb placed one hand upon the wolf’s head.

“He thinks you are dangerous.”

“He is correct.”

Jory looked at Johnathan. Robb did not appear reassured.

“Dangerous does not mean hostile,” Johnathan added.

“My father says something similar about Ice.”

“That is a sword.”

“Yes.”

The comparison landed exactly as Robb intended. Johnathan looked at him more carefully. Fourteen years old. Already measuring people as allies, threats, and responsibilities. In another future, thousands would call him king. That future did not need to happen. Johnathan hoped it never would.

“Do not treat me like a weapon.”

Robb frowned.

“I did not.”

“You compared me to one.”

“You said you were dangerous.”

“I am also a person.”

“A person has a heartbeat.”

The words were blunt. Not deliberately cruel. Johnathan lowered his eyes.

“Usually.”

Robb’s anger faltered. Johnathan looked at his pale hands.

“I do not know what I am. That frightens your family.”

He raised his eyes again.

“It frightens me too.”

For the first time, Robb appeared to see something other than the creature who had terrified his parents. A stranger. A healer unable to explain his own condition. A man who might never return home. Robb loosened his grip upon his sword.

“If you lie about Bran, I will kill you.”

Jory stiffened. Johnathan nodded.

“That is a reasonable instinct.”

“It was not a comment about instinct.”

“I know.”

Robb stepped away. Grey Wind followed him. Before leaving, Robb looked back.

“My father calls you Doctor Harrow.”

“Yes.”

“Not Johnathan of Ohio?”

“Ohio is a place.”

“It sounds like a noise someone makes after being struck.”

Johnathan watched him walk away.

“That is unfairly accurate.”

Jory resumed walking.

“You handled that poorly.”

“I thought it went well.”

“He threatened to kill you.”

“That is the most normal interaction I have had today.”

* * *

The chamber prepared for Johnathan stood on the second level of the Great Keep. It was not luxurious. Compared with the tower room, it felt almost royal. A narrow bed rested against one wall beneath thick wool blankets. A wooden table stood near the window with two chairs. A clay basin and pitcher sat upon a washstand. A small fire burned within the hearth. The walls were warm.

Johnathan placed one hand against the stone. A faint vibration moved beneath the surface.

“Water?”

“The hot springs,” Jory answered. “Channels carry the warmth through parts of the castle.”

“Central heating.”

“What?”

“Nothing. It is impressive.”

Johnathan had thought of Westeros as primitive. Winterfell disagreed. Someone had designed and maintained a system capable of using natural heat to warm a castle built across several acres. No electric pump. No modern concrete. No computer-guided planning. Only stone, gravity, water, accumulated knowledge, and generations of labor.

Perhaps he had arrived with fewer reasons to feel superior than he imagined. Jory entered behind him. The guards remained outside.

“This is where you will stay.”

Johnathan examined the room.

“Whose chamber was it?”

“No one occupies it presently.”

“That is a diplomatic answer.”

“A visiting knight died here three winters ago.”

Johnathan looked toward the bed.

“Natural causes?”

“He fell down the stairs while drunk.”

“Was he dead before reaching the bottom?”

Jory stared at him.

“That was a joke.”

“I know.”

“You do not have to punish every joke.”

“You will learn.”

Johnathan looked toward the open door.

“Will it remain unlocked?”

“Yes.”

He turned toward Jory.

“If a tower wall cannot hold you, a wooden bolt serves no purpose.”

“That is surprisingly reasonable.”

“You sound disappointed.”

“Escaping an unlocked room lacks drama.”

“You are not escaping.”

“I know.”

Jory folded his arms.

“You heard Lord Stark’s rules.”

“Yes.”

“I will not repeat them.”

Johnathan felt a wave of gratitude.

“Thank you.”

“I will add only this. The guards outside are not decorations.”

“I assumed.”

“You tell them where you are going before you leave.”

“I am not allowed to leave the Great Keep.”

“Then informing them should be simple.”

“What if Maester Luwin summons me?”

“They accompany you.”

“Lord Stark?”

“They accompany you until dismissed.”

“Lady Catelyn?”

“The same.”

“The privy?”

Jory pointed toward a narrow door beside the hearth. Johnathan opened it. A garderobe had been built into the outer wall. Cold air rose through the shaft.

“Excellent.”

Jory moved toward the passage.

“Captain.”

He stopped. Johnathan looked toward the guards.

“The men who heard what I said in the Great Hall, ”

“They will be dealt with.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“They will be sworn to silence.”

“People talk.”

“Not after Lord Stark commands otherwise.”

“Fear makes people talk. Gold makes them talk faster.”

Jory’s expression darkened.

“The queen possesses both.”

Johnathan nodded.

“If the rumor reaches her before Ned has proof, she may act against anyone who carried it.”

“That includes the men.”

“Yes.”

“Their families.”

“Yes.”

Jory looked into the passage. The guards outside remained motionless.

“They will understand.”

Johnathan hesitated.

“Alyn?”

“Confined to the barracks until I decide his punishment.”

“Will he be flogged?”

Jory looked back.

“You ask mercy for the man who kicked you.”

“I ask that you avoid opening his back with a lash.”

“He struck a bound prisoner after receiving an order to stop.”

“Yes.”

“He dishonored Lord Stark’s custody.”

“I understand.”

“Then why interfere?”

Johnathan looked at his cold hands.

“Because the kick did not harm me.”

“That does not excuse him.”

“No.”

Johnathan met Jory’s eyes.

“But I would rather not begin my life in Winterfell by having a frightened man whipped for failing to injure me.”

“Fear does not excuse cruelty.”

“No.”

“You agree too easily.”

“I spent the morning discovering that being correct about one thing does not make me correct about everything.”

Jory studied him. At last, he said, “Alyn will clean the kennels for thirty days. His pay will be reduced. He will not approach you without permission.” Johnathan released a breath.

“Thank you.”

“He may hate you more for receiving mercy.”

“That seems inefficient.”

“Men often are.”

Jory stepped into the passage. The grey-bearded guard moved aside. Johnathan looked around the chamber again. The fire. The table. The window. The unlocked door.

Two armed men outside. He could pass through the nearest wall, descend through the castle, and vanish into the Wolfswood. No one could stop him. That knowledge brought no comfort. Freedom without a destination was merely another form of being lost. Jory paused before leaving.

“You are not free.”

“I know.”

“You are not a prisoner.”

“I know.”

“You are under Lord Stark’s protection while he decides what should become of you.”

“That is a long title.”

“It is not a title.”

Then Jory left. Maester Luwin arrived less than an hour later. He carried no instruments. Only parchment, a quill, a small inkpot, a container of sand, and three books stacked against his chest. Johnathan looked at the empty space beneath his arm.

“Where are the pajamas?”

“Secured.”

“Where?”

“My tower.”

“Locked?”

“Yes.”

“Dry?”

“Yes.”

“Away from fire?”

Luwin stared at him.

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

The maester placed the writing materials upon the table.

“The garments are covered in clean linen and locked inside a wooden chest.”

“That is probably safer than most clothing has ever been.”

“I have also removed the buttons.”

Johnathan went still. Luwin allowed the silence to continue for exactly one heartbeat that Johnathan did not possess. Then he said, “That was humor.” Johnathan stared.

“You made a joke.”

“I was testing whether you recognize them when others speak.”

“That was cruel.”

“It was successful.”

Johnathan placed one hand over his face.

“You are learning too quickly.”

Luwin arranged the parchment.

“The ravens are being prepared.”

“To Castle Black?”

“Yes. One message to Lord Commander Mormont concerning Royce, Will, and Gared. Another summoning Benjen Stark.”

Johnathan nodded. No need to discuss it again. The order had already been given. Now it was being carried out. Luwin placed the books beside the ink. A map of the North. A history of Winterfell. A collection of accounts concerning the Night’s Watch.

“You asked for books.”

Johnathan touched the first cover.

“I expected the request to take longer.”

“Lord Stark approved materials selected by me.”

“That last part sounds important.”

“It is.”

“No detailed maps of secret tunnels?”

“No.”

“No forbidden books about raising the dead?”

“No.”

“No engineering manuals for building trebuchets?”

Luwin frowned.

“What is a trebuchet?”

Johnathan stopped.

“Something this world already knows how to build.”

“Then why ask?”

“It was a joke.”

“A poor one.”

“You have become impossible since discovering humor.”

Luwin sat in the second chair.

“You will begin your record.”

Johnathan looked at the parchment.

“Tonight?”

“Now.”

“I thought you came for another examination.”

“Tomorrow morning.”

Johnathan did not like how calmly that was said.

“How extensive?”

“Extensive.”

“That is not a reassuring answer.”

“It was not intended to be.”

Luwin dipped the quill.

“Lord Stark does not require another account of who you are.”

Johnathan looked at him.

“Good.”

“He requires an organized record of dangers that may be investigated or prevented.”

“That is different.”

“Yes.”

Luwin drew the parchment closer.

“Separate certainty from memory.”

Johnathan considered the wording.

“Some memories are certain.”

“Not when you admit that the future is changing.”

“Fair.”

Luwin wrote the first heading. **Immediate known dangers.** Beneath it, he left space.

“What belongs there?” the maester asked.

“Bran’s fall.”

“That has not occurred.”

“It is immediate and preventable.”

Luwin wrote it.

“Jon Arryn’s murder.”

“Known?”

“I know he was murdered. We cannot yet prove who ordered or committed it.”

Luwin added the name.

“Robert’s death.”

“Not immediate until he returns south.”

“Still important.”

The quill moved again.

“The royal succession.”

Luwin paused.

“That could begin a war merely by being written.”

“Then phrase it as Jon Arryn’s investigation into the royal children.”

The maester did so.

“The Others.”

Luwin’s quill stopped.

“That remains unproven.”

“Put it beneath a second heading.”

He wrote: Claims requiring proof. Beneath it: The disappearance of Ser Waymar Royce and Will. The return of the dead. The Others. Johnathan leaned over the parchment.

“Add the cause of Jon Arryn’s death.”

“Lysa Arryn.”

“And Petyr Baelish’s involvement.”

Luwin’s mouth tightened at the name, but he wrote it.

“Anything else?”

Johnathan thought of the future. Daenerys and the eggs. Drogo. Renly’s crown. Stannis beneath Dragonstone. Theon at Winterfell. The Red Wedding.

The Wall falling. Too much. Far too much.

“Not tonight.”

Luwin looked up.

“That may be the first time you have declined to provide unnecessary information.”

“I am improving.”

“Slowly.”

Johnathan drew another sheet toward himself.

“At some point, I need a section for events already changed.”

Luwin considered that. He wrote: **Events altered by Doctor Harrow’s arrival.** Bran Stark is being watched before the royal visit. Lord Eddard knows the subject of Jon Arryn’s investigation.

Castle Black has been asked about the missing ranging. Benjen Stark has been summoned earlier and for different reasons.

Johnathan read the list. Four changes. He had arrived that morning.

“Add that Ned may delay accepting the Handship.”

“Lord Stark has not decided that.”

“Then place it under possible changes.”

Luwin made another heading. Johnathan watched the parchment fill. The future had once been a road. Now it resembled a tree splitting into branches faster than he could follow. Each warning created a choice. Each choice created several new futures. Every new future weakened the value of the memories that had made him useful.

“How long before my knowledge becomes unreliable?” he asked. Luwin set the quill down.

“I cannot answer.”

“Neither can I.”

“Then do not pretend otherwise.”

Johnathan looked at him.

“You and Ned have developed a shared method of making obvious advice sound profound.”

“The obvious is often what frightened men forget first.”

That was annoyingly good. Johnathan looked through the window. Bran crossed the yard below with Summer at his heels. Harwin followed at a distance. Robb and Jon approached from the opposite side with

Grey Wind and Ghost. All three boys came together near the kennels. Bran gestured angrily toward one of the towers. Robb answered.

Jon crouched beside Summer and examined one paw. The wolves circled them. Alive. Walking. Arguing. Johnathan felt something inside him loosen.

“Give Bran responsibility for Summer,” he said. Luwin followed his gaze.

“He already considers the wolf his.”

“Make caring for him a duty. Feeding. Watching his behavior. Helping keep him away from the royal horses when Robert arrives.”

“You believe that will prevent Bran from climbing?”

“No.”

“Then why?”

“It gives him a reason to remain on the ground that does not feel like punishment.”

Luwin considered the idea.

“I will bring it to Lord Stark.”

“Make Robb and Jon part of it.”

“They already care for their own wolves.”

“Then make Bran feel included rather than watched.”

Luwin studied Johnathan.

“That is not medical knowledge.”

“No.”

“Did your books tell you to do this?”

“No.”

“Then where did the idea come from?”

“Children resist rules when the rule removes something without giving them another purpose.”

“You have children?”

“No.”

“You treated them.”

“Yes.”

Luwin looked through the window again.

“Purpose instead of punishment.”

“It does not always work.”

“Nothing always works.”

“That may be the wisest thing anyone has said today.”

“I have said several wise things.”

“You hide them well.”

Luwin gathered the completed sheets.

“I will place these in Lord Stark’s solar.”

“May I keep a copy?”

“No.”

“What happens if I remember something at night?”

“Write it upon a separate sheet. I will review it tomorrow.”

“Review it?”

“Before it is given to Lord Stark.”

“You are censoring my prophecy.”

“I am preventing a sleepless stranger from filling a castle with panic before breakfast.”

Johnathan could not argue with that. Luwin rose. At the door, he looked back.

“Rest.”

“I may not need to.”

“Attempt it.”

“Why?”

“Because we do not yet know what you require.”

Johnathan glanced toward the bed.

“I feel no fatigue.”

“Your body may still require periods of stillness.”

“That sounds scientifically reasonable.”

“You speak as though surprised.”

“I am adjusting to a maester being competent.”

Luwin’s face remained neutral.

“Tomorrow’s examination will be less gentle.”

Johnathan watched him leave.

“I withdraw the compliment.”

* * *

Near sunset, Jory returned. This time, he came with Ned. They did not bring Catelyn. No one asked Johnathan who he was. No one asked where he came from. No one asked him to prove his powers.

Those questions had already been answered as far as they could be. Ned entered the chamber and walked directly to the window. He looked down into the yard. Bran remained with the wolves. Johnathan stood beside the table.

“Maester Luwin brought you the list.”

“He did.”

“The ravens?”

“Sent.”

Johnathan nodded. Ned turned.

“The lower entrance of the broken tower has been barred.”

“Bran can climb the exterior.”

“Two men watch it from the armory roof. Another pair works nearby beneath the appearance of inspecting loose stone.”

“That is good.”

“Jory examined the chamber.”

Johnathan waited.

“No bedding,” Ned continued. “No wine. No recent use.”

“The Lannisters are not here yet.”

“I know.”

“Now you have a record of how it looked before they arrived.”

Ned nodded. That was planning. Not another interrogation. One known danger. One preventative action. One baseline established before circumstances changed.

“Bran has been told that caring for Summer is his responsibility,” Ned said. Johnathan looked toward the yard.

“How did he react?”

“He informed Robb that he already knew more about direwolves than anyone in Winterfell.”

“That sounds healthy.”

“He found the pups this morning.”

“Knowledge has never prevented confidence.”

The faintest movement touched Ned’s mouth. It vanished quickly.

“He remains angry.”

“He can be angry while walking.”

Ned’s expression changed. Catelyn’s words, repeated through him.

“He may.”

The lord of Winterfell approached the table.

“The household has been given its account.”

Johnathan nodded.

“Doctor Johnathan Harrow. Foreign healer from a distant land beyond the eastern maps. Found near the Wolfswood and placed under Luwin’s protection.”

“Under mine,” Ned corrected.

“Right.”

“You will not contradict it.”

“I will not.”

“Robert may ask questions when he arrives.”

“Why would a king care about a foreign healer?”

“Robert notices anything unusual for as long as it amuses him.”

“And then?”

“He finds something else.”

Johnathan looked down at his pale hands.

“So I need to become boring quickly.”

“Yes.”

“That may be impossible.”

“Try.”

Johnathan caught himself.

“I will.”

Ned glanced toward the open doorway.

“The guards will continue watching you.”

“I know.”

“You may accompany Luwin when he requires assistance.”

Johnathan looked up.

“You are allowing me to practice medicine?”

“I am allowing Luwin to determine whether your knowledge has value.”

“That is fair.”

“You will treat no one alone.”

“Agreed.”

“You will perform no strange experiment upon anyone.”

“Agreed.”

“You will not teach anything capable of becoming a weapon without my approval.”

Johnathan thought of gunpowder. Steam engines. Explosives. Industrial mills. Chemical production.

A medieval arms race fueled by knowledge from a world that had spent centuries learning how to kill efficiently.

“Agreed.”

Ned noticed his hesitation.

“You thought of something.”

“Many things.”

“Dangerous things?”

“Yes.”

“Name one.”

Johnathan remained silent for a moment. Then he looked at Ned.

“Where I come from, we created weapons powerful enough to incinerate entire cities in an instant. We built enough of them to burn the whole world.”

Ned stared at him in stunned silence. Johnathan continued, his voice quieter.

“The weapons created by my people have killed hundreds of millions. I spent much of my life as a doctor trying to repair what even the smaller ones did to human bodies.”

He looked down at his pale hands.

“I did not always save them.”

The chamber remained silent. At last, Ned asked, “And you know how such weapons are made?”

“I know enough to begin conversations this world should never have.”

Ned’s expression hardened.

“Then keep that knowledge to yourself.”

“Gladly.”

“You will not teach it to a smith, a maester, a lord, or a king.”

“No.”

“Not even if you believe it could win a war.”

Johnathan met his eyes.

“Especially then.”

Johnathan looked toward the yard. The first long shadows stretched between the buildings.

“Robert is coming.”

“Yes.”

“The royal children.”

“Yes.”

“Jaime and the queen.”

Ned’s expression warned him. Johnathan stopped.

“I am not reopening the accusations.”

“Good.”

“I only need to understand what you want me to do during the arrival.”

“Stand with Luwin among the household.”

“Not hidden?”

“Too many people have seen you.”

“That is unfortunate.”

“Hiding you now would give the rumors greater weight.”

Johnathan imagined Robert studying him. Cersei measuring him. Jaime noticing where his eyes moved. Tyrion asking questions no cover story could survive.

“I should remain silent.”

“Yes.”

“Bow when everyone bows.”

“Yes.”

“Do not stare at the Lannisters.”

“Yes.”

“Do not look at the royal children as though examining a genetic puzzle.”

Ned frowned.

“A what?”

“Do not look at them strangely.”

“Correct.”

“What if Robert speaks to me?”

“Answer the question asked. Nothing more.”

“Luwin taught me that frightened liars answer six questions before anyone asks them.”

“He is correct.”

“You people agree too often.”

Ned looked toward the table.

“The king may offer me the Handship soon after arriving.”

Johnathan became serious.

“You said you would not answer immediately.”

“I will hear him.”

Johnathan hesitated.

“He will want to see Lyanna’s statue in the crypts.”

Ned’s eyes sharpened.

“How do you know that?”

“We have already established how I know.”

“That answer grows less comforting each time you use it.”

“I know.”

Johnathan moved closer to the table.

“Robert will ask to visit the crypts soon after he arrives. He will stand before Lyanna’s tomb, remember the woman he believes was stolen from him, and ask you to become his Hand.”

Ned glanced toward the door, as though the king might already be standing beyond it.

“And what answer do I give him?”

“You refuse.”

Ned looked back at him.

“You sound certain.”

“I am not. Not anymore. But you know what accepting costs now. I do not believe you will willingly take your family south after everything I have told you.”

“And Robert?”

“He will become angry.”

“How angry?”

“Angry enough that, for a moment, you may believe he intends to strike you.”

Ned's expression hardened.

"Robert would never raise a hand against me."

"He loves you. That does not mean he responds well when denied."

Johnathan looked toward the window.

"He has crossed half the realm expecting you to say yes. He believes the matter was decided before he left King's Landing. Your refusal will feel like betrayal."

"Will he command me?"

"He may threaten to."

"And if I still refuse?"

"His visit will become much shorter."

Ned considered that in silence.

"At least Bran will remain safe while the royal party is here," Johnathan continued. "The less time Jaime and the queen spend inside Winterfell, the fewer opportunities they have to create another disaster."

Ned's gaze settled upon him.

"If events occur as you describe, Robert visiting Lyanna, offering me the Handship, and becoming furious when I refuse, then you will have earned a measure of trust."

"A measure?"

"Enough that you may be permitted to walk through Winterfell without guards following every step."

Johnathan nodded slowly.

"That would be nice."

"Do not mistake it for freedom."

"I wouldn't dare."

Ned rested one hand upon the table.

"What happens after Robert leaves?"

Johnathan's expression changed.

"Benjen will want to speak with me about the Others."

"That much is expected."

"He may also attempt to kill me."

Ned stared.

“My brother will do no such thing.”

“To him, I will look like something that came south from beyond the Wall. I have no heartbeat. I do not breathe unless I choose. My skin is cold, and ordinary weapons may not harm me.”

“You are not a wight.”

“I know that. Benjen will not.”

“He will listen before drawing steel.”

“I hope so.”

Johnathan folded his arms.

“Once he is convinced that I am not one of the dead, he will want me to travel north with him. He will believe the Night’s Watch needs to see what I am and hear what I know.”

“And I allow this?”

Johnathan hesitated. Ned noticed immediately.

“Again. Are you certain?”

“No.”

“Then why say it?”

“Because I remember the old history, but something else has begun happening since I arrived.”

Ned’s face became guarded.

“What?”

“I am not sure.”

“That is not an answer.”

“It is the only honest one I have.”

Johnathan searched for words that would not make the uncertainty sound like madness.

“Sometimes, when I am near people whose choices matter, I feel something. Pressure. A direction. As though several possible futures are pulling upon them at once.”

“You can see what they will do?”

“No. Nothing that clear.”

“Read their thoughts?”

“No.”

“Then what are you sensing?”

Johnathan looked toward Ned.

"It may be nothing more than instinct mixed with what I already know. Or it may be the fate of the people near me. I cannot tell yet."

Ned's expression did not soften.

"You will not act upon such feelings without speaking to me."

"I agree."

"You will not present them as certainty."

"No."

"You will not frighten my family with guesses."

Johnathan lowered his eyes.

"No."

Ned remained silent for several moments. Then he asked, "What happens to my children?" Johnathan looked up.

"If neither of us changes the history you knew," Ned continued. "What becomes of them?"

Johnathan did not answer immediately. Ned leaned forward and placed both hands upon the table.

"You have already told me that some of us die. I want the shape of it."

Johnathan looked away.

"It is too much."

"Perhaps."

"I have already hurt your family by speaking too freely."

"Then speak carefully."

Johnathan met his eyes.

"You want me to continue?"

"Yes."

The single word allowed no retreat. Johnathan drew a breath he did not need.

"Jon leaves for the Wall soon after Robert departs. Not years later. Within months."

Ned's hands tightened against the table.

"He chooses the Night's Watch?"

“Yes. He believes there is no true place for him in Winterfell once you leave.”

Ned's face revealed pain, but he did not interrupt.

“Jon becomes a steward to Lord Commander Jeor Mormont. One night, the body of a dead ranger rises inside Castle Black and attacks Mormont.”

“A dead ranger.”

“A wight.”

Ned's expression darkened.

“Jon saves him. He burns his hand badly doing it, but Mormont survives.”

“And rewards him?”

“With Longclaw. The Valyrian steel sword of House Mormont.”

Ned straightened.

“Jeor gives his ancestral blade to Jon Snow?”

“Yes.”

“That is no small gift.”

“No. It changes Jon's life.”

Johnathan continued more slowly.

“Later, Jon travels beyond the Wall. He is taken among the wildlings and learns that the threat is greater than the Watch understands.”

“Mance Rayder.”

“And the Others.”

Ned nodded grimly.

“What of the man you named before? Craster?”

“He lives beyond the Wall with his daughters.”

“You said he sacrifices children.”

“His sons.”

Johnathan's voice became quieter.

“Every boy born beneath his roof is left for the Others.”

Ned stared at him.

“Why?”

“Because the Others take them.”

“For what purpose?”

Johnathan hesitated.

“I believe they transform the children into more of their kind.”

The fire cracked within the hearth. Ned’s face became stone.

“And the Night’s Watch knows of this man?”

“Some know enough to understand that he gives his sons to the cold. They tolerate him because his hall offers shelter and information beyond the Wall.”

“They permit him to murder his own blood.”

“Yes.”

Ned looked sickened. Johnathan continued before he lost the courage to do so.

“Jon eventually becomes Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch.”

Ned’s eyes returned to him.

“Jon?”

“Yes.”

“He is chosen?”

“Yes. Young, but chosen.”

A trace of pride moved through Ned’s grief. It did not last. Johnathan looked down.

“He understands that the wildlings are not the true enemy. The Others are. He allows thousands of free folk through the Wall so they will not die and rise again in the army of the dead.”

“A wise decision.”

“Many of his own brothers call it treason.”

Ned already understood the ending.

“What do they do?”

“They lure him into the yard.”

Johnathan paused.

“Then they stab him.”

Ned’s face went still.

“How many?”

“I do not remember.”

“Does he die?”

“In the history I knew, the chapter ended while he was bleeding into the snow.”

“That is not an answer.”

“No.”

Johnathan met his eyes.

“But I believed his story was not finished.”

Ned looked toward the fire.

“My brother rides toward the Wall, and my son follows him into death.”

“Not necessarily.”

“You just told me, ”

“I told you what happened when none of us knew what was coming.”

Johnathan stepped closer.

“Jon has not taken his vows. You have not gone south. Benjen has not vanished. The paths are already changing.”

Ned remained bent over the table.

“And Robb?”

Johnathan closed his eyes. Ned’s voice hardened.

“Continue.”

“If you go south with Robert, you become Hand. Jon Arryn’s investigation draws you toward the truth about the royal children.”

“I am arrested.”

“Yes.”

“And executed.”

“Yes.”

“By Robert?”

“No.”

“Then by whom?”

“Joffrey.”

Ned’s mouth became a hard line.

“Robert’s son.”

“The boy Robert believes is his son.”

Johnathan corrected himself.

“Joffrey orders your execution after you publicly confess to treason in exchange for mercy.”

“He breaks the agreement.”

“Yes.”

Ned looked down at his hands.

“And Robb rides south to avenge me.”

“Yes.”

“With the northern banners.”

“Yes.”

“Does he reach King’s Landing?”

“No.”

Johnathan’s voice became almost a whisper.

“He wins battles. Every battle he fights.”

“Then how does he die?”

“By believing that sacred customs will protect him.”

Ned looked up. Johnathan continued.

“Robb is betrayed at a wedding beneath another man’s roof. He is given food and drink. Guest right is invoked. Music begins.”

Ned understood before Johnathan finished.

“No.”

“The doors are closed. The Freys and Boltons turn upon him.”

“No.”

“Grey Wind is killed outside.”

Ned pushed away from the table. Johnathan stopped. The silence filled the chamber. After several breaths, Ned spoke without facing him.

“And Robb?”

Johnathan could barely force out the words.

“He dies calling for Grey Wind.”

Ned stood motionless.

“I am sorry.”

“Do not apologize for words I commanded you to speak.”

Johnathan looked at the floor.

“That does not make them easier.”

“No.”

Ned turned back. His face was pale, but his voice remained controlled.

“If I refuse Robert, does that prevent Robb’s death?”

“It may prevent the war that placed him upon that road.”

“May.”

“Yes.”

“You cannot promise.”

“No.”

Ned returned to the table. He placed both hands upon it again, but this time the gesture was not anger. It was support. Something solid beneath him.

“Then we change what we can.”

Johnathan nodded.

“Yes.”

“And where the future becomes uncertain?”

“We stop pretending uncertainty means helplessness.”

CHAPTER 7

THE CHAMBER WITH A VIEW

Johnathan did not sleep. He tried. That seemed important. The bed was real. The blankets were thick. The mattress smelled faintly of wool, cedar, and the previous occupants of a castle that had stood for thousands of years. The fire had burned low sometime after midnight. Its final coals glowed within the hearth, painting the chamber walls with a weak red light. Johnathan lay beneath the blankets with his eyes closed. He remained perfectly awake.

No heaviness gathered behind his eyes. No thoughts softened at their edges. His body did not drift toward sleep because his body did not appear to require rest. Eventually, he opened his eyes. The chamber was dark. A guard coughed in the passage outside. Another shifted upon a wooden stool. Johnathan listened to the sounds of Winterfell at night. Wind moved around the towers.

A dog barked somewhere near the kennels. Water whispered through ancient channels inside the walls, carrying heat from the springs beneath the castle. Farther away, a raven gave a rough, irritated cry. Johnathan stared at the ceiling. He had spent years wishing he needed less sleep. Now the absence of it felt like theft. Sleep had divided one day from the next. It had provided a small death followed by an ordinary resurrection.

Close the eyes. Lose the world. Wake and begin again. Without sleep, yesterday had never ended. The interrogation continued inside his mind. Catelyn's face when he told her Robb would die. Ned's hand gripping his tunic.

The words, *You made a promise*. Robb standing in the yard with one hand near his sword. Bran glaring at him after being forbidden to climb. Johnathan turned onto his side. The mattress

creaked beneath him. One of the guards spoke through the partly open door.

“Are you well?”

Johnathan looked toward the darkness beyond it.

“Yes.”

“You have been moving.”

“I was attempting to sleep.”

A pause followed.

“Were you successful?”

“No.”

“Try harder.”

Johnathan smiled faintly.

“That is excellent medical advice.”

The guard did not answer. Johnathan sat up. The grey wool tunic he had worn all day lay folded over one chair. The rough trousers hung beside it. He wore a plain linen undershirt Maester Luwin had provided before leaving him for the night. His black-and-red pajamas remained locked inside the maester’s tower. Johnathan missed them more than any reasonable man should miss clothing decorated with tiny dragons. They belonged to Earth. That made them sacred.

He left the bed and crossed to the window. The shutters were open. Iron bars divided the narrow opening, though they existed more to prevent an accidental fall than an escape. Johnathan placed both hands upon the cold stone ledge. Winterfell slept beneath him. Torchlight burned along the inner walls. The towers stood black against a sky crowded with unfamiliar stars. He knew the constellations of Earth. Orion.

Cassiopeia. The Big Dipper. He searched for them now. Some patterns appeared almost familiar. Then the angles changed. Stars existed where none should have been. Familiar shapes bent into unfamiliar forms beneath an alien sky. Johnathan looked away.

The reality of another world was easier to accept during daylight, when people moved, argued, bled, and required

immediate answers. At night, the sky offered no distractions. He was not in Ohio. He was not on Earth. Whatever force had brought him here had not placed him in a remote century of his own world. He was somewhere else. Johnathan returned to the table.

A piece of parchment waited beside a stoppered inkpot. Luwin had provided both after Johnathan asked to begin recording what he remembered. His first list remained unfinished. Immediate known dangers. Bran's fall. Jon Arryn's murder. Robert's death.

The royal succession. The Others. My own interference. Johnathan dipped the quill into the ink. Writing with it was harder than films made it appear. The tip scratched. The ink flow changed with the angle. His handwriting looked as though a nervous spider had dragged itself across the parchment. He added another heading. What has already changed. Beneath it, he wrote: Ned knows Jon Arryn was murdered. Ned knows Jaime and Cersei are together. Bran is being watched.

The broken tower will be inspected. Castle Black has been asked about Waymar Royce, Will, and Gared. Benjen has been summoned. Ned knows Robert may die during a hunt. The words covered more than half the sheet. Johnathan sat back. Seven changes in less than one day.

Each one split the future into new possibilities. Bran might remain safely on the ground. Jaime and Cersei might never enter the broken tower. Ned might refuse the Handship. Robert might survive the boar. Stannis might be warned before Jon Arryn's investigation vanished into silence. Or the Lannisters might notice the changes and act sooner.

Cersei might decide Winterfell had become dangerous. Jaime might remove a witness before that witness understood what he had seen. Littlefinger might adjust his plans when Ned failed to travel south. The Others would continue moving regardless of who sat the Iron Throne. Johnathan lowered the quill. His

knowledge had once resembled a map. Now it resembled a map during an earthquake.

The roads remained inked upon the page even as the land moved beneath them. He added one more line. Do not confuse memory with certainty. Then he stared at the warning.

“That should have been first.”

The fire gave a soft crack. Johnathan continued writing until grey morning light entered the window. He made separate sections. People who must be watched. Events that may still happen. Information requiring proof. Secrets that must not be revealed.

The final section contained only one line. Jon Snow. Johnathan sanded the wet ink, waited, then folded the parchment so the name disappeared inside. A soft knock sounded against the open door. Maester Luwin entered carrying a tray. The guards rose outside. Johnathan looked toward the window.

“Morning?”

“Yes.”

“That was fast.”

Luwin placed the tray upon the table. It held dark bread, cheese, two boiled eggs, and watered wine.

“You did not sleep.”

It was not a question. Johnathan looked at him.

“Were the guards reporting my nocturnal failures?”

“They heard you moving throughout the night.”

“I attempted to rest.”

“And?”

“I became extremely accomplished at lying still.”

Luwin studied his face.

“No redness in the eyes. No sluggishness. No trembling of the hands.”

“I do not feel tired.”

“You said yesterday that you did not require sleep.”

“I suspected it.”

“And now?”

“Now I have evidence.”

Luwin moved toward the bed and touched the blankets. They were cold.

“You did not remain beneath them long.”

“I don’t require warmth either.”

“Yet you kept the fire.”

“I like fire.”

“For heat?”

“For familiarity.”

Luwin considered that.

“A corpse does not seek familiarity.”

“I am starting to believe you say things like that merely to see how I react.”

“I observe reactions.”

“That sounds more scholarly.”

The maester opened his leather case. Johnathan looked at the breakfast.

“I am not hungry.”

“Eat regardless.”

“I ate in the tower cell,” Johnathan said. “Bread and mutton porridge. My body accepted both.”

“I did not observe that meal,” Luwin replied. “Nor did I control what you ate or how much. Eat.”

Johnathan picked up one of the boiled eggs.

“This is a remarkably casual way to discuss my digestive system.”

“It ceased being casual yesterday.”

He cracked the shell against the table. Luwin watched. Johnathan peeled the egg and took a bite. It tasted ordinary. Slightly overcooked. A little sulfurous. The most comforting thing in the world.

“Do you feel the food moving through your throat?” Luwin asked.

“Yes.”

“Into your stomach?”

“Yes.”

“Pain?”

“No.”

“Nausea?”

“No.”

“Fullness?”

“No.”

Luwin made a note. Johnathan ate the rest.

“Your body accepts food without requesting it.”

“That appears accurate.”

“Where does it go?”

“I was hoping you knew.”

Luwin’s expression became severe.

“You claim to be the physician.”

“I have never treated an immortal corpse.”

The guards outside went silent. Johnathan looked toward the door.

“Poor phrasing.”

Luwin selected a narrow strip of clean linen.

“Your left hand.”

Johnathan extended it. The maester wrapped the strip around one finger and pulled the knot tight.

“What are you testing?”

“Circulation.”

“There is none.”

“So you claim.”

Luwin watched the fingertip. In a living person, restricted blood flow would darken the skin before making it pale or blue. Johnathan’s finger did not change. Luwin tightened the linen. Nothing. He removed it. The skin remained pale and smooth.

“No swelling,” Luwin murmured.

“No blood collecting behind the binding.”

“Correct.”

He pressed Johnathan’s fingernail until it should have blanched, then released it. The color did not change because

there had been no color to remove. Luwin looked almost offended by the result.

“My circulation is being uncooperative.”

“You possess no circulation.”

“That too.”

The maester removed a small piece of polished metal. He held it beneath Johnathan’s nose.

“Breathe normally.”

Johnathan inhaled and exhaled. Mist formed faintly upon the metal.

“Stop.”

Johnathan stopped. The mist vanished. Luwin waited. One minute passed. Then two. Johnathan felt no pressure in his chest. No growing panic.

No need. The maester placed two fingers against Johnathan’s throat. Nothing moved.

“Speak.”

“I remain socially uncomfortable with this test.”

Luwin removed his hand.

“You produce speech by moving air through the throat.”

“Yes.”

“Yet you do not require it for thought or movement.”

“Yes.”

“Can you smell without breathing?”

Johnathan paused. He looked toward the breakfast. The bread had a smoky grain scent. The cheese smelled sharp. He stopped moving air intentionally. The scents weakened.

“I think I need to draw air through my nose to smell.”

Luwin recorded that.

“Can you taste without breathing?”

“I don’t know.”

The maester cut a small piece of cheese. Johnathan accepted it. He held his breath and ate. The cheese tasted salty and sour, though less strongly than before.

“Yes. But smell contributes to flavor.”

Luwin looked up.

“Explain.”

“The tongue detects certain basic tastes. Much of what people call flavor comes from scent.”

The maester wrote quickly.

“You know this with certainty?”

“Yes.”

“From your medical education?”

“And from losing smell during illness.”

“What illness?”

“Common respiratory infections.”

Luwin continued writing. Johnathan watched the parchment.

“You are documenting everything.”

“Yes.”

“What will you call the record?”

Luwin looked at him.

“Observations Concerning Doctor Johnathan Harrow, an Allegedly Living Man Without Breath, Pulse, Warmth, Hunger, Fatigue, or Sensible Explanation.”

Johnathan considered it.

“Catchy.”

“I may shorten it.”

“You would lose important nuance.”

Luwin’s eyes moved toward Johnathan’s folded parchment.

“What have you written?”

Johnathan placed one hand over it.

“My memory of future dangers.”

“Lord Stark ordered the record kept in his solar.”

“When it is complete.”

“It will never be complete.”

“That is true.”

Luwin held out one hand. Johnathan hesitated. The maester waited. Johnathan passed him the folded parchment. Luwin did not immediately open it.

“You trusted me with your strange garments.”

“Under protest.”

“You asked me for writing materials.”

“Yes.”

“Yet now you fear I will read your writing.”

“I know what some of the words can do.”

Luwin unfolded the parchment. His eyes moved across the lists. He paused at the final heading. Secrets that must not be revealed. The parchment beneath it remained folded inward. Luwin did not open that part. Johnathan noticed.

“Thank you.”

“You marked it private.”

“That has never stopped many scholars.”

“A maester serving a lord must understand which knowledge is his to carry and which is his to spread.”

Johnathan thought of the Citadel. Its suspicion of magic. Its control over ravens, records, and noble education. He did not trust the institution. Luwin was not the institution. Not entirely. The maester studied the section titled *Information requiring proof*. Jon Arryn’s lineage book. Robert’s bastards. Waymar Royce’s ranging. The queen and Jaime using the broken tower. Lancel providing fortified wine. Littlefinger influencing Lysa Arryn. Luwin tapped the final name.

“You advised Lady Catelyn to ask Lord Stark what she wishes him to know about Lord Baelish.”

“Yes.”

“You know something personal.”

“Yes.”

“Something from before her marriage.”

Johnathan remained silent. Luwin folded the parchment.

“You have improved.”

“At what?”

“Refusing to answer.”

“That does not feel like improvement.”

“It may preserve lives.”

Luwin handed the parchment back. A commotion sounded below the window. Shouting. A horse screamed. Boots struck stone in the passage outside. One of the guards turned toward the stair. Johnathan rose.

“What happened?”

A servant appeared at the doorway, breathing hard.

“Maester. The stable yard.”

Luwin closed his case.

“Who?”

“Hullen’s younger stable boy. Noll.”

“What happened?”

“A horse kicked him.”

Luwin moved immediately. Johnathan followed. The guards blocked the doorway. Johnathan stopped.

Luwin looked back.

“He is confined to the Great Keep,” one guard said.

“I know.”

The servant spoke again.

“There is blood, Maester. A great deal.”

Johnathan’s body became still. The room changed. Not physically. Inside him. The uncertainty, guilt, and impossible questions narrowed into one familiar purpose. Someone was hurt.

“Where was he struck?” Johnathan asked. The servant looked at him.

“What?”

“Head? Chest? Abdomen?”

“His leg. The horse caught him against a post.”

Johnathan turned toward Luwin.

“Crush injury.”

The maester studied him for one breath. Then he addressed the guards.

“He comes with me.”

“Lord Stark ordered...”

“Lord Stark placed him under my examination and calls him a healer.”

The grey-bearded guard remained uncertain. Johnathan spoke.

“Send someone to Jory. We will not wait for permission while the boy bleeds.”

The guard looked at Johnathan’s pale face. Then at Luwin.

“Stay between us.”

“I was planning to.”

They hurried down the passage. Johnathan did not run at full speed. He could have. Instead, he matched Luwin’s pace as they descended the stairs and crossed the inner yard. Servants moved aside. Several stared when they saw the pale stranger walking freely with the maester. The stable yard lay beyond a low stone wall.

A crowd had formed near one of the stalls. A chestnut horse fought against two men trying to calm it. Its eyes showed white. Blood streaked one rear hoof. A boy lay upon the ground beside a broken rail. He could not have been older than ten. Hullen knelt beside him, pressing both hands against a soaked cloth wrapped around the boy’s lower leg. The child screamed whenever anyone moved him.

“Clear the space,” Luwin commanded. People obeyed. Johnathan knelt opposite Hullen. The stablemaster looked up.

“What is he doing here?”

“Helping,” Luwin answered. Johnathan assessed the scene. The boy was conscious. Crying. Breathing quickly. His face was pale but not grey. The horse had kicked or trapped the leg against the wooden post. The lower trouser leg had torn. Blood flowed beneath Hullen’s hands.

“Noll,” Luwin said. “Look at me.”

The boy’s eyes moved toward him.

“My leg.”

“I know.”

“It hurts.”

“That means you are alive.”

Johnathan placed two fingers against the side of the boy’s neck. Rapid pulse. Strong enough. He looked at Hullen.

“Do not remove the cloth yet.”

The stablemaster’s eyes narrowed.

“I know how to press a wound.”

“Good. Keep pressing.”

Johnathan looked toward the servants.

“I need clean water. Boiled if possible, cooled enough to touch. Clean linen. More than you think we need. Two straight pieces of wood, each longer than his lower leg. And soap.”

A stable hand stared.

“Soap?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“To wash.”

The man looked toward Luwin.

“Do as he says,” the maester ordered. People scattered. Johnathan placed his hands gently above and below the injury without moving the leg.

“Noll, can you feel my hand on your foot?”

The boy sobbed.

“Yes.”

“Can you move your toes?”

The foot twitched.

“Again.”

The toes moved. Good. Johnathan examined the angle of the limb. No obvious bend suggested a displaced fracture, though swelling had already begun. The bleeding remained the immediate threat. He looked at Luwin.

“I need to see beneath the cloth.”

Hullen’s grip tightened.

“If I lift it, he bleeds.”

“We will replace your hands with mine. Slowly.”

Hullen looked toward the pale stranger. Johnathan understood the hesitation.

“My hands are cold. That may help narrow the blood vessels.”

Luwin frowned.

“Will it?”

“Possibly. Mostly, I need to identify the source.”

The maester nodded. Hullen shifted one hand. Johnathan placed his own palm over the cloth, maintaining pressure. His cold skin met the boy's blood. The sensation should have disturbed him. Instead, training took control. Blood was information.

Color. Rate. Direction. The life of a patient leaving through an opening that needed to be found and stopped.

“Lift one edge,” Johnathan said. Hullen obeyed. Johnathan saw the wound. A deep tear along the outer calf. Dark venous blood. No bright arterial spray. Muscle visible beneath torn skin. Possibly bone damage, but the wound did not expose bone.

“Not an artery,” Johnathan said. Hullen did not understand.

“The largest blood vessel appears intact. Keep pressure.”

The stablemaster released a breath. The supplies arrived. A kitchen servant carried steaming water in a covered pot. Another brought folded linen. A groom held two clean pieces of wood. Johnathan looked at the soap.

“Everyone touching him washes their hands.”

The stable workers stared. Hullen looked offended.

“My hands are not the danger.”

“They may carry dirt into the wound.”

“He was kicked into mud.”

“That is already a danger. We will not add more.”

Luwin watched Johnathan.

“Explain.”

“Small living things too tiny to see can enter wounds and cause infection.”

The stablemaster looked at the blood.

“Worms?”

“Smaller.”

“Spirits?”

“No.”

“Poison?”

“In a way.”

Luwin’s face became thoughtful.

“You claim unseen living creatures cause wound fever.”

“Many wound fevers. Not all.”

“Can they be killed?”

“With heat, certain chemicals, and medicines we do not possess. Washing reduces them.”

Luwin rolled up his sleeves.

“Show me.”

They washed with soap and cooled boiled water. Johnathan scrubbed between his fingers, beneath his nails, and across the backs of his hands. The surrounding people watched as though he were conducting magic.

“Clean linen beneath the leg,” Johnathan ordered. They slid folded cloth beneath Noll without lifting the limb more than necessary. The boy screamed. Johnathan leaned closer.

“Noll. Look at me.”

The boy’s tear-filled eyes found his.

“I know it hurts.”

“Make it stop.”

“We are going to help. I need you to remain still.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.”

The words came from countless rooms on Earth. From frightened children beneath fluorescent lights. From adults attempting bravery while blood spread beneath them.

“You do not need to be quiet. You may scream. You may curse me. But keep the leg still.”

The boy swallowed hard. Hullen brushed damp hair away from his forehead.

“You heard him.”

Noll nodded. Luwin opened a small bottle.

“Milk of the poppy.”

Johnathan examined it.

“How much?”

“For a boy his size, three drops in wine to begin.”

“Risk of stopping his breathing?”

Luwin looked at him sharply.

“Yes.”

“Then use the smallest effective amount.”

“You know this medicine?”

“I know medicines like it.”

Luwin administered the drops. They waited. Johnathan maintained pressure. The bleeding slowed.

Noll’s cries became less sharp. His eyelids grew heavy, though he remained conscious. Johnathan removed the blood-soaked cloth carefully.

“Pour the water from above. Do not let the container touch the wound.”

A servant obeyed. Pink water ran across the linen beneath the leg. Dirt washed away. Johnathan found several splinters of wood near the edges. He removed them with Luwin’s forceps. The maester watched every movement.

“There may be deeper debris,” Johnathan said. “We should not close this tightly while dirt may remain.”

“You would leave it open?”

“Partly. Clean it, pack it lightly, cover it, and watch for corruption. We can close it later if the wound remains healthy.”

Luwin considered that.

“The scar will be larger.”

“A large scar is better than a buried infection.”

The maester nodded. They explored the wound carefully. No further debris. No exposed bone. The bleeding had nearly stopped. Johnathan palpated the leg gently. Noll cried out at one point along the shin.

“Possible fracture.”

Luwin placed his hands where Johnathan indicated.

"I feel no break."

"Could be a crack without displacement. We treat it as broken."

The wooden splints were wrapped in clean cloth and placed on either side of the lower leg. Johnathan showed the stable hands how to bind them without cutting off circulation.

"Check the toes," he said. "They must remain warm and their usual color."

Hullen looked at Johnathan's hands.

"Not his usual color."

"His usual color. Not mine."

Even Luwin smiled at that. They packed the wound lightly with clean linen, covered it, and secured the dressing without closing the torn flesh. Johnathan sat back. Blood covered his hands and the front of his borrowed tunic. Noll looked toward him through half-closed eyes.

"Am I going to lose it?"

Johnathan glanced at Luwin. The maester allowed him to answer.

"I don't think so."

The boy's lips trembled.

"You don't know?"

"No healer should promise what he cannot know."

Johnathan touched the bandage.

"But you can feel your foot. You can move your toes. The bleeding has stopped. Those are good signs."

"Will I walk?"

"That is the plan."

Hullen stared at Johnathan.

"You speak strangely for a dead man."

Johnathan looked down at his blood-covered hands.

"So I have been told."

A door opened behind the crowd. Jory Cassel entered with two guards. His gaze moved from the injured boy to Johnathan.

“I was told Doctor Harrow left the Great Keep.”

Luwin stood.

“I brought him.”

Jory looked toward the stablemaster. Hullen nodded reluctantly.

“He helped.”

Johnathan rose. His tunic had absorbed the boy’s blood. The grey wool appeared almost black across the front. Jory’s expression changed.

“Are you injured?”

“No.”

“Whose blood?”

“Noll’s.”

The captain looked at Johnathan’s hands.

“You should clean yourself.”

“I strongly agree.”

Jory turned toward Luwin.

“Lord Stark will want an explanation.”

“He shall have one.”

Johnathan addressed Hullen.

“The dressing must be changed if it becomes soaked or dirty. Wash your hands first. Keep the leg raised. Do not let him stand upon it.”

“For how long?”

“We examine him daily. Watch for fever, worsening redness, swelling, foul smell, darkening skin, confusion, or red lines moving upward.”

Hullen absorbed the list.

“And if any appear?”

“Find me and Maester Luwin immediately.”

Luwin looked at Johnathan.

“Me first.”

Johnathan nodded.

“Him first.”

Noll's eyes closed. His breathing remained steady. Johnathan watched his chest rise and fall. The injury could still become infected. Without antibiotics, a contaminated crush wound could kill. He knew too much about the dangers and too little about what this world could provide. The old feeling returned. A physician standing between a patient and death with insufficient tools. That part, at least, had followed him across worlds.

* * *

Ned received them in his solar. Johnathan had washed his hands and changed into another borrowed tunic. The bloodstained clothing had been taken for cleaning. Luwin had refused to let him return to his chamber before reporting. Jory stood near the door.

Catelyn sat beside the hearth with a piece of needlework resting untouched in her lap. Robb stood near the window. Jon was not present. Johnathan noticed that immediately. Ned looked from Luwin to Johnathan.

"You left the Great Keep."

"Yes."

"Without my permission."

"Luwin gave permission."

Ned turned toward the maester.

"A child was bleeding."

"I judged Doctor Harrow's presence useful."

"Was it?"

Luwin did not answer immediately. That concerned Johnathan more than a quick denial would have.

"He possesses practical skill," Luwin said at last. "His examination was orderly. His treatment was sensible. Some of his claims require investigation."

"The tiny creatures," Johnathan said. Ned frowned. Luwin explained.

"He says wound fever may be caused by living things too small for the eye."

Robb looked skeptical.

“How can something be living if no one can see it?”

Johnathan turned toward him.

“Can you see the air?”

“No.”

“Yet it moves banners.”

“That is wind.”

“Wind is moving air.”

Robb considered that. Johnathan continued.

“Some things exist beyond what the naked eye can detect.”

“Magic,” Catelyn said.

“No.”

Her eyes remained guarded.

“You walk through stone but reject magic.”

“I reject using the word whenever we do not understand something.”

Luwin’s expression showed approval. Ned leaned back in his chair.

“The boy.”

“Noll,” Johnathan said. “The bleeding is controlled. He may have a fracture. The wound was dirty, which creates danger over the next several days.”

“Will he live?”

“I believe so.”

“Believe.”

Johnathan nodded.

“I cannot promise.”

Ned studied him.

“You told him that?”

“Yes.”

“Most healers offer hope.”

“False certainty is not hope.”

Catelyn’s hands tightened around the needlework. Johnathan understood too late how the sentence might sound after everything he had told her. He lowered his eyes.

“I did not mean...”

“I know what you meant,” she said. Her voice held no warmth. No immediate anger either. That was progress of a sort. Ned looked toward Luwin.

“You trust his treatment?”

“I trust parts of it. The washing was excessive.”

“It was not.”

Luwin ignored him.

“The splint was sound. The wound cleaning was thorough. His concern about closing a dirty wound too tightly has merit.”

“Which parts do you not trust?” Ned asked.

“The claim of invisible living creatures. His insistence that every person touching the patient wash with soap. The precise signs he expects if corruption begins.”

Johnathan looked at the maester.

“You have seen wound fever.”

“Often.”

“You have seen redness spread from a wound.”

“Yes.”

“Swelling. Heat. Pus. Foul odor.”

“Yes.”

“People become feverish and confused.”

“Yes.”

“Then the signs are not disputed. Only the cause.”

Luwin’s eyes narrowed.

“That is correct.”

“Good. We can work with that.”

Ned watched them.

“You sound as though you intend to remain.”

Johnathan looked at him.

“I thought that was the arrangement.”

“It was an observation.”

Johnathan glanced toward Catelyn. She had asked why he remained. The answer had not changed.

“I intend to help while I am here.”

Ned looked toward Jory.

"From now on, Doctor Harrow may accompany Maester Luwin when summoned to treat an injury or illness."

Johnathan felt a small release of tension.

"Thank you."

"He remains under guard."

"Of course."

"He does not wander."

"I did not wander."

"You crossed half the inner yard."

"With purpose."

Ned's eyes hardened. Johnathan nodded.

"I will ask next time."

Catelyn placed the needlework aside.

"The household will hear of this."

"It already has," Jory said. "Half the stable yard watched."

"What are they saying?"

"That the dead healer stopped a boy from bleeding."

Johnathan closed his eyes briefly.

"That title is not improving."

Robb looked amused. Catelyn did not. Ned considered the matter.

"Our account remains unchanged. He is Doctor Harrow, a healer from a distant land beyond the eastern maps."

"And his condition?" Catelyn asked.

"A rare illness," Luwin said. Johnathan looked at him.

"An illness?"

"People understand illness."

"They may avoid me."

"They already avoid you."

"Fair."

Robb crossed his arms.

"What illness makes a man walk through stone?"

"The guards were frightened," Ned said. Robb looked at his father.

"I saw his arm inside the pillar."

Silence followed. The cover story had encountered its first internal difficulty. Johnathan looked toward Ned.

"Perhaps the household need not receive one perfect explanation."

Ned frowned.

"Explain."

"Let the rumors disagree."

Luwin's eyes sharpened. Johnathan continued.

"One person says I am ill. Another says the guards were drunk. Another says I used a hidden opening. Another says the story grew after passing through ten servants."

"You want confusion," Catelyn said.

"I want every impossible claim surrounded by enough foolish claims that sensible people dismiss them together."

Ned considered the idea.

"You have done this before."

"No."

"You speak with confidence."

"My world had rumors."

"About men walking through walls?"

"Mostly less interesting things."

Jory shifted near the door.

"What happens when someone sees him do it?"

"I stop doing it where people can see."

Robb looked toward Johnathan.

"Can you become invisible?"

Johnathan hesitated. Every face in the solar changed. Robb saw it.

"You can."

"I don't know."

"You hesitated."

"Because I have already discovered several impossible abilities."

"Have you tried?"

“No.”

That was true. Robb stepped closer.

“You should.”

“No,” Ned said. The single word ended the discussion. Johnathan nodded.

“Not publicly.”

Ned’s eyes fixed upon him.

“Not privately either.”

“What if we need to understand the limits?”

“Luwin may design examinations. You will not experiment alone.”

Johnathan remembered pushing his hand into the tower wall. The fear of becoming solid inside stone.

“That is reasonable.”

Catelyn looked toward the window.

“Robert will arrive before we understand what he is.”

Johnathan noticed the word. What. Not who. He did not blame her. Ned looked at Jory.

“How many days?”

“The latest outriders place the king more than a fortnight away if the royal party maintains its present pace.”

Johnathan calculated. Enough time for a raven to reach Castle Black. Enough time for a reply. Enough time for Benjen to receive the summons and begin riding south. Enough time for many things to go wrong. Ned returned his attention to Johnathan.

“You said Bran’s fall occurs during the king’s visit.”

“Yes.”

“Before or after Robert offers me the Handship?”

Johnathan searched his memory. Robert and Ned went to the crypts soon after the arrival. The offer came there. Bran climbed later, while the castle prepared for the feast and hunt.

“After the offer, before the royal party leaves.”

“During which day?”

“I don’t remember precisely.”

Catelyn’s frustration returned.

“You remembered the window but not the day.”

“I remember the sequence better than the hours.”

Ned nodded slowly.

“The broken tower has been inspected.”

Johnathan looked at him.

“And?”

“No recent bedding. No wine. No sign that anyone currently uses the room.”

“That makes sense. The Lannisters have not arrived.”

“Jory placed new bars across the lower entrance.”

“Bran can climb the outside.”

Robb almost smiled. Ned looked toward him.

“He can.”

“Harwin suggested removing several loose stones that provide handholds,” Jory said.

“No,” Johnathan replied. Everyone turned toward him. He continued.

“If the tower suddenly becomes impossible to climb, Jaime may wonder why.”

Ned’s face hardened.

“You believe he will inspect every wall?”

“No. But visible changes create questions.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Watch the tower without making it look watched. Put workmen nearby repairing something unrelated. Station a man with a clear view from another roof. Keep Bran occupied.”

Robb spoke.

“He is furious.”

“I noticed.”

“He believes the order came from you.”

Johnathan looked surprised.

“Why?”

“Because before you arrived, Father allowed him to climb.”

Johnathan turned toward Ned. The lord’s expression confirmed it.

“That is a problem.”

Catelyn’s eyes flashed.

“My son’s anger is less important than his legs.”

“Yes.”

“But?”

Johnathan chose his words carefully.

“If Bran thinks I am the reason he lost something he loves, he will avoid me and hide his climbing. A direct prohibition may make the broken tower more attractive.”

“He is seven,” Ned said.

“Exactly.”

Robb nodded.

“Bran climbs more when told not to.”

Catelyn looked toward her eldest son.

“That is not helpful.”

“It is true.”

Johnathan leaned forward.

“Give him a reason to remain on the ground.”

Catelyn remembered their conversation.

“The wolves.”

“Yes. Make Bran responsible for helping care for Summer. Have him work with the kennelmaster, even if the kennelmaster refuses to handle the pups directly.”

Robb frowned.

“We already feed them.”

“Then training. Tracking. Learning their behavior.”

“They are direwolves,” Robb said. “Not dogs.”

“I know.”

“How do you train a direwolf?”

“I have absolutely no idea.”

Robb blinked. Johnathan continued.

“But Bran does not know that. Let him help discover it.”

Luwin looked toward Ned.

“Study may occupy him.”

Catelyn considered the idea.

“He will still climb.”

“Yes,” Johnathan said. “The goal is to reduce opportunity, not pretend we can remove his nature.”

Ned looked at Robb.

“You and Jon will include Bran when you tend the pups.”

Robb nodded.

“And no climbing,” Catelyn added. Robb wisely said nothing. Ned dismissed him. As Robb reached the door, Johnathan spoke.

“Robb.”

The boy turned.

“How is Grey Wind?”

“Suspicious of you.”

“I meant generally.”

“He eats.”

“Good.”

“He bit Theon.”

Johnathan smiled.

“Better.”

Ned gave him a warning look. Robb left. Catelyn rose.

“I will speak with Bran.”

She passed Johnathan without another word. At the door, she paused.

“You did well with the stable boy.”

Johnathan looked at her. The praise appeared to cost her something.

“Thank you.”

“That does not mean I trust you.”

“I know.”

She left. Jory followed. Ned, Luwin, and Johnathan remained. Ned looked toward the fire.

“My wife spoke with you last night.”

“Yes.”

“What did she ask?”

Johnathan considered the question.

“Whether I remained because of duty, loyalty, or affection.”

“What did you answer?”

“That I knew what happened when no one warned your family.”

Ned waited. Johnathan continued.

“She asked about Jon.”

Ned’s face became still.

“I kept my promise.”

“What did you say?”

“That the truth could place him in danger.”

Ned closed his eyes.

“That was too much.”

“Yes.”

“You continue failing at silence.”

“Yes.”

“Why did you say it?”

“Because she guessed Robert.”

Ned opened his eyes. Johnathan raised one hand.

“I did not confirm it.”

“You did not need to.”

“I know.”

Ned crossed the room. For a moment, Johnathan expected anger. Instead, Ned stopped at the window.

“My wife is not a fool.”

“No.”

“She will continue asking.”

“I know.”

“She may discover the truth without either of us speaking it.”

Johnathan remained silent. Ned looked across Winterfell.

“Would that endanger Jon?”

“Not from Catelyn.”

“From Robert.”

“Yes.”

“How?”

Johnathan hesitated.

“You know the answer.”

"I know what I fear."

Ned turned.

"I want to know what you read."

Johnathan looked toward Luwin. The maester understood.

"I will wait outside."

Ned stopped him.

"No."

Luwin remained. Ned looked at Johnathan.

"He already knows there is a secret. He knows it concerns the Tower of Joy and my promise. I trust him with my life."

Johnathan did not question that.

"What exactly do you want to know?"

"If Robert learns Jon's parentage, what does he do?"

Johnathan remembered Robert ordering Daenerys killed while she carried a child. He remembered his hatred of Rhaegar surviving fifteen years. He remembered the bodies of Rhaegar's children laid before the throne.

"Robert would see a threat."

"He is a boy."

"Robert saw Rhaegar's infant children as threats."

Ned's face tightened.

"He did not order their deaths."

"He accepted them afterward."

The words cut. Johnathan did not withdraw them. Ned looked away.

"Would Robert kill Jon himself?"

"I don't know."

"Would he order it?"

"I believe so, if convinced Jon possessed a claim and might press it."

"Jon would never."

"Robert would not need certainty. Only fear."

Ned's hand closed into a fist. Luwin remained very still. Johnathan continued softly.

"Your secrecy protected him."

“For how long?”

“In the future I knew, the truth remained hidden beyond your death.”

Ned looked at him sharply.

“Who discovered it?”

Johnathan shook his head.

“That knowledge belongs later.”

“You speak of my death and still bargain with truth.”

“I am trying to avoid creating another path toward it.”

Ned stared at him. Then the anger weakened. Not because he accepted the refusal. Because he understood it.

“You believe knowledge can cause the event it warns against.”

“Yes.”

“Yet you told us about Bran.”

“The danger was immediate.”

“And Jon’s is not?”

“Not unless the secret spreads.”

Ned looked toward Luwin. The maester spoke carefully.

“Then containment remains the safest course.”

Ned nodded. Johnathan felt the decision settle. Catelyn would not be told yet. Jon would remain unaware. The secret continued. But no longer unchanged. Catelyn had seen its outline.

Luwin knew it touched the Tower of Joy and Robert’s crown. Johnathan had weakened the walls around it. Another entry for his list. My own interference. Ned moved toward the door.

“You will return to your chamber.”

Johnathan nodded.

“May I continue helping Noll?”

“With Luwin.”

“Thank you.”

“Do not mistake permission for trust.”

“I won’t.”

Ned stopped beside him.

“You saved the boy pain.”

“Luwin’s milk of the poppy did that.”

“You stopped the bleeding.”

“Hullen had already slowed it.”

“You cleaned and bound the wound.”

“With help.”

Ned looked mildly irritated.

“Can you accept credit for anything?”

“I accepted too much credit when I arrived.”

The answer silenced him. Ned opened the door.

“Write that upon your list.”

“I already did.”

* * *

For the next several days, Johnathan’s chamber became part cell, part study, and part infirmary consultation room. The guards remained outside. The door remained unlocked. Luwin arrived each morning with questions. Johnathan answered what he could. They discussed fever.

Blood loss. The structure of the lungs. The purpose of the heart. The brain and nerves. The difference between unconsciousness, sleep, coma, and death. Luwin’s understanding of anatomy was better than Johnathan expected in some areas and dangerously incomplete in others. The Citadel knew organs.

It knew bones. It understood that certain injuries caused predictable loss of movement or speech. But disease remained tangled with bad air, imbalance, inherited weakness, poisoned food, divine judgment, and theories built from observation without microscopes. Johnathan drew diagrams. Poor ones. Luwin corrected the proportions even when he did not understand the function.

“The heart has four chambers,” Johnathan explained.

“That much is known,” Luwin replied. “What remains disputed is how the blood moves between them.”

Johnathan looked at him.

“You have examined hearts.”

“Animal and human.”

“That would have saved many arguments on Earth.”

“You claimed your people understand the body more completely.”

“We have tools that reveal what the eye cannot.”

“The seeing machines.”

“Imaging machines.”

“Without cutting?”

“Yes.”

Luwin studied the drawing again.

“And your heart?”

“Still four chambers, presumably.”

“Presumably.”

“I would prefer not to verify by opening my chest.”

“I had not suggested it.”

“You considered it.”

Luwin did not deny that. They examined Johnathan’s reflexes. His pupils. His hearing. His strength was discovered by accident. Luwin had looped a thick leather strap around Johnathan’s hands to test the force of his grip. Johnathan squeezed only until he felt resistance. The strap tore apart with a dry snap, sending one end across the chamber.

Neither man spoke for several breaths. Luwin gathered the broken leather, examined the torn fibers, and ended the examination. The next test was conducted privately in Ned’s solar with the doors shut. Only Ned, Luwin, and Jory were present. Jory carried stones into the room one at a time, then dismissed the servants who had helped move them. The stones were placed inside a reinforced wooden crate. Jory and Luwin struggled together to drag it several feet.

Johnathan lifted it with one hand. The leather grip groaned. He set it down quickly. Ned stared at the crate.

“How much more could you lift?”

“I don’t know.”

“You showed no strain.”

“I felt the weight. It simply wasn’t difficult.”

Jory looked at him differently. Not as a prisoner. As a siege engine wearing borrowed wool. Ned's voice became low.

"No one else is to know this."

Johnathan nodded.

"I agree."

"You will not display this strength before my household."

"No."

"You will not use it against any man unless protecting a life."

"Agreed."

Luwin recorded the result without naming an exact limit. The parchment went directly into Ned's locked chest. Each afternoon, Johnathan and Luwin examined Noll. The boy's wound remained clean. No fever. No foul smell. The swelling began to settle.

They replaced the packing and dressing each day, watching the exposed tissue for signs of corruption. Noll complained about the splint, the bed, the food, and being forbidden to visit the horses. Johnathan considered the complaining an excellent sign. By the fourth afternoon, rumors had changed. The dragon ghost had become the pale doctor. Some servants still crossed themselves when Johnathan passed. Others brought questions.

A cook with wrist pain. A washerwoman with a burn. An old guard whose knee had swollen every winter for fifteen years. Luwin refused to let Johnathan treat anyone alone. Johnathan welcomed the restriction. He lacked modern tools and needed someone who understood local herbs, medicines, and customs. They disagreed often.

Luwin favored bloodletting in conditions where Johnathan believed it would weaken the patient.

Johnathan insisted upon washing hands and instruments until servants began calling him Lord Soap. He considered it an improvement over dead sorcerer. The chamber with a view slowly acquired books. Maps of the North. A history of the Night's Watch. A damaged copy of *The Lineages and Histories of the Great Houses of the Seven Kingdoms*.

Johnathan stared at that volume when Luwin placed it upon the table.

“This is the book Jon Arryn used.”

“A copy of it.”

“Does Ned know?”

“Yes.”

“Has he looked?”

“He began last night.”

Johnathan touched the worn cover. Inside lay page after page of marriages, children, hair colors, eye colors, and family traits. Evidence hidden inside genealogy. The sentence *the seed is strong* transformed from mystery into diagnosis. Luwin watched him.

“You are certain this matters.”

“Yes.”

“Then find the passages.”

Johnathan opened the book. He did not remember exact page numbers. Of course he did not. The book from the story had become an actual object containing hundreds of years of noble marriages. He searched. Hours passed. At last, he found one union between a Baratheon and a Lannister.

The child had black hair. Then another. Black hair. A third. Black hair. Luwin copied the entries. Johnathan felt no triumph.

Only the slow, cold certainty that Jon Arryn had been right. The evidence was real in this world. So was the danger surrounding it. On the evening of the fifth day, Johnathan stood at his window while the Stark children crossed the yard below. Robb carried a bucket. Jon walked beside him with another. Bran followed, holding a smaller bowl with both hands.

Grey Wind, Ghost, and Summer moved around them. Bran had remained on the ground. Johnathan smiled. The strategy had worked for five days. That did not make it permanent. Jon looked up. His eyes found Johnathan’s window.

Ghost had probably noticed him first. The white wolf stood motionless, red eyes fixed upon the chamber. Johnathan raised one hand. Jon did not wave. After a moment, he walked toward

the Great Keep alone. Johnathan's smile faded. Footsteps sounded outside.

The guard announced him.

"Jon Snow."

Johnathan turned. Jon stood in the doorway. Ghost waited beside him. The direwolf's fur remained smooth, but his stare was too intelligent. The guard looked uncertain.

"Lord Stark ordered no private meetings with the children."

Jon's face tightened at the word *children*.

"I am not a child."

"You are fourteen," the guard said.

"So is Robb."

"He is Lord Stark's heir."

Jon looked toward Johnathan.

"I only want to ask him a question."

Johnathan remained near the window.

"Ask it from the doorway."

The guard accepted that compromise. Jon did not enter. Ghost sat beside his leg.

"You knew our names," Jon said.

"Yes."

"All of us."

"Yes."

"You knew the wolves."

"Yes."

"You knew Bran would be in danger."

"Yes."

Jon's expression remained solemn.

"What do you know about me?"

The question reached across the chamber like a blade. Johnathan looked at Ghost. The direwolf stared back. He remembered his promise.

"I know you care for your brothers and sisters."

"That is not secret."

"No."

“You knew something in the Great Hall.”

Johnathan said nothing. Jon continued.

“Robb will not tell me what happened after Father sent him away. He says Father ordered silence.”

“Then he is obeying.”

“Robb is terrible at silence.”

“That may explain his mood.”

Jon stepped closer to the threshold. The guard placed one hand against his chest. Jon stopped.

“Did you speak about my mother?”

Johnathan’s world became very quiet. He did not look away.

“No name was spoken.”

“That was not my question.”

Johnathan almost smiled despite himself. Every Stark child had learned that response.

“I cannot answer.”

Jon’s jaw tightened.

“Then you know.”

Johnathan said nothing. Ghost rose. The wolf did not growl. That was somehow worse. Jon lowered his voice.

“Did Father tell you?”

“No.”

“How could you know when he will not tell me?”

Johnathan felt the cruelty of every possible answer. Because your life was entertainment where I came from. Because strangers argued about your mother before you learned her name. Because I knew the dead woman beneath Winterfell better than her own son knew her.

“I learned things I had no right to learn.”

Jon stared at him.

“That sounds like a confession.”

“It is.”

“Was she highborn?”

Johnathan remained silent.

“Is she alive?”

The question hurt more.

“No.”

Jon looked down. He had probably known. Knowing without certainty did not reduce the pain. Ghost pressed against his leg. Jon placed one hand upon the wolf's head.

“Did she want me?”

Johnathan closed his eyes briefly. Lyanna's blood. Her hand holding Ned's. Promise me. A child born beneath a tower while men died outside. Johnathan could answer without naming her. He could give Jon one truth.

But that truth belonged to Ned.

“I promised your father I would not speak.”

Jon's face hardened.

“He is not my father when the question is about her.”

“He is the man who carried the answer for fourteen years to keep you safe.”

Jon went still. Johnathan immediately knew he had said too much. Again.

“Safe from what?”

“I cannot answer.”

“Robert.”

Johnathan's silence betrayed him. Jon's face changed. The boy understood only a fragment. Enough to be dangerous. The guard looked between them, confused. Johnathan stepped forward.

“Jon, stop.”

“Why would the king care who my mother was?”

“Ask Lord Stark.”

“I have.”

“Ask him again.”

“He refuses.”

“Then there is a reason.”

Jon's voice sharpened.

“You know the reason.”

“Yes.”

“And you refuse as well.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because the truth is not only about what you deserve to know. It is also about who may hear it afterward.”

Jon glanced toward the guard. Johnathan understood. The conversation had already gone too far.

“Leave us,” Jon told the man. The guard shook his head.

“No.”

Johnathan agreed.

“He stays.”

Jon looked betrayed. Johnathan continued.

“I will not help you corner your father’s secret through me.”

“My life is not his secret.”

“No.”

Johnathan’s voice softened.

“It is yours. That is exactly why I will not reveal it carelessly.”

Jon stared at him for a long moment. Then he looked away.

“Did she love me?”

The question was barely audible. Johnathan’s promise strained. He remembered Lyanna’s fear leaving her when Ned gave his word. He remembered the child she had fought to protect.

“Yes.”

Jon’s eyes returned to him. Johnathan continued before he could ask more.

“That is all I will say.”

The boy’s throat moved. Ghost remained pressed against his leg.

“Was that in your book?”

“Yes.”

“Then perhaps the book lied.”

“It did not lie about that.”

Jon looked toward the window. Below, Bran shouted when Summer stole a cloth from Robb. The ordinary sound entered the chamber. Jon’s face became guarded again.

“Robb says you are dangerous.”

“He is correct.”

“Bran says you are strange.”

“He is also correct.”

“Sansa says you are cursed.”

“Possible.”

“Arya wants to see you walk through a wall.”

“Absolutely not.”

Jon almost smiled. It vanished quickly.

“Father says I am not to speak with you alone.”

“He has good instincts.”

Jon turned to leave. Johnathan stopped him.

“Jon.”

The boy looked back.

“Your father’s silence is not shame.”

Jon’s expression tightened.

“You do not know that.”

“I do.”

“You said you would not speak.”

“That is not the same as revealing the secret.”

“It is close.”

“Yes.”

Johnathan nodded.

“I am bad at this.”

Jon looked at him for another moment. Then he left with Ghost. The guard stared after them.

“What did that mean?”

Johnathan returned to the window.

“It means I continue failing at silence.”

* * *

The raven arrived on the sixth morning. Johnathan was in Noll’s room when the bells sounded from the rookery. The boy had developed no fever. His toes remained warm. The wound edges

looked healthy. Johnathan was adjusting the splint when rapid footsteps crossed the stable passage.

A servant appeared.

“Maester Luwin is wanted in the Great Keep.”

Luwin looked up.

“By whom?”

“Lord Stark. A raven from Castle Black.”

Johnathan’s hands stopped. Noll noticed.

“Is it bad?”

“I don’t know.”

That answer again. Johnathan secured the final binding.

“Do not put weight on it.”

“I know.”

“You attempted to stand yesterday.”

Noll looked toward Hullen. The stablemaster folded his arms. The boy sighed.

“I won’t.”

Johnathan rose. Luwin closed his case. The guards followed them across the yard. The winter sky hung low and grey above Winterfell. Ravens circled the rookery. One descended toward the tower with slow black wings. Johnathan watched it.

The reply had come quickly, but not impossibly so. The first raven had flown north. Castle Black had received the message, prepared its answer, and sent another bird south. Ned waited in his solar. Catelyn stood beside him. Jory was present. Robb and the younger children had been excluded.

A strip of parchment lay open upon the table. Ned did not invite Johnathan to sit. Luwin stepped forward.

“The reply?”

Ned handed him the parchment. The maester read silently. His face changed. Johnathan waited. Luwin read aloud.

“Ser Waymar Royce departed Castle Black with Will and Gared. They had been gone long enough to be considered missing when your message arrived.”

No one moved. Luwin continued.

“None returned to the Wall.”

Catelyn looked toward Johnathan. He felt no satisfaction. The first part had been verified. That made the rest harder to dismiss.

“Lord Commander Mormont confirms the names,” Luwin said. “He confirms that Royce led them north to follow a band of wildlings.”

Ned’s hand rested beside the parchment.

“What of the bodies?”

“No bodies, weapons, horses, or other certain trace of the ranging has been recovered.”

Johnathan remembered Gared fleeing. Will strangled beneath the tree. Waymar rising with one blue eye. The raven’s message transformed the prologue from a remembered scene into recent deaths. Real men. Real families. Real graves that did not exist.

Ned looked at him.

“You knew all three names.”

“Yes.”

“You described Royce’s clothing.”

“Yes.”

“You said his sword shattered.”

“Yes.”

“You said Will hid in a tree.”

“Yes.”

Catelyn’s face had gone pale.

“And Gared saw enough to flee.”

“Yes.”

Ned looked toward Ice hanging upon the wall.

“I took his head.”

Johnathan said nothing. The lord of Winterfell’s jaw tightened.

“He deserted.”

“Yes.”

“The law required judgment.”

“Yes.”

“He spoke only of dead men and cold shadows.”

“He was terrified.”

“I listened.”

Johnathan remembered the book. Ned had asked questions. Gared had been half-mad with fear. The law had already decided what his words meant before he spoke them.

“You listened as a lord judging a deserter,” Johnathan said carefully. “Not as a man investigating a witness.”

Ned’s eyes hardened. Jory shifted near the door. Catelyn watched her husband. Johnathan continued.

“That does not make you cruel. It means none of you believed his warning could be true.”

Ned looked down at the parchment.

“He may have been the only living man who returned from whatever happened.”

“He remained with the horses when Waymar and Will went forward.”

“Then what did he see?”

“I don’t know.”

Ned looked at him sharply. Johnathan held the gaze.

“The account followed Will. Not Gared.”

Ned understood. The strange books did not grant Johnathan complete knowledge. Only selected windows. Catelyn touched the parchment.

“If Royce and Will are dead, could they rise?”

“Yes.”

The word entered the room like winter air. Jory’s hand moved toward his sword.

“South of the Wall?”

“No. They died north of it.”

“What stops the dead from crossing?” Jory asked.

“The Wall may.”

“May.”

Johnathan looked toward Luwin.

“The Wall contains old magic.”

The maester frowned.

“So the tales say.”

“They are correct.”

Ned’s expression became grim.

“What if the Wall fails?”

“The dead come south.”

Silence followed. Outside, men shouted as supplies were moved for the royal visit. The king was now less than ten days away. The enemy beyond the Wall had claimed two rangers and driven a third into terror, desertion, and death. Ned looked toward Luwin.

“And Benjen?”

“There is a second message.”

Luwin unrolled the smaller strip attached beneath the first. He read it.

“Benjen Stark departed Castle Black two days ago upon receiving your summons. He rides with three men and expects to reach Winterfell before the king.”

Ned released a breath. Johnathan calculated the distance. A hard ride south. Benjen knew the road. Possible. Especially with fresh horses at holdfasts and inns. Ned looked toward Johnathan.

“My brother will hear what concerns the Watch.”

“Yes.”

“Nothing about Jon.”

Johnathan’s guilt sharpened. He remembered the previous evening. Jon asking whether his mother loved him.

“I understand.”

Ned saw something in his face.

“What have you done?”

Johnathan considered lying. The attempt would fail.

“Jon came to my chamber.”

Catelyn’s head turned sharply. Jory swore beneath his breath. Ned stepped around the table.

“You were forbidden to speak with my children alone.”

“The guard remained present.”

“What did Jon ask?”

“About his mother.”

Ned’s face became cold.

“What did you tell him?”

“No names. No parentage. No birth name.”

“What did you tell him?”

Johnathan forced himself to answer.

“That she was dead.”

Ned’s jaw tightened.

“Jon already suspected that.”

“I told him she loved him.”

The anger in Ned’s face changed. Not gone. Complicated. Catelyn looked away. Johnathan continued.

“I told him your silence was not shame.”

Ned stood motionless.

“And?”

“He guessed Robert might be connected to the danger.”

Ned closed his eyes. Johnathan’s voice became quiet.

“I did not confirm it.”

“You did not need to.”

“I know.”

Ned turned away. For several breaths, only the fire moved. Johnathan looked at the floor.

“I should not be permitted near him.”

Catelyn looked back. The admission surprised her. Johnathan continued.

“I know too much. He deserves answers, and every time he asks, refusing feels cruel. Then I give him one small piece, and the piece points toward another.”

Ned faced him again.

“You will not speak with Jon without me present.”

“Agreed.”

“You will not speak with any of my children privately.”

“Agreed.”

“You will not answer questions concerning their futures.”

“Agreed.”

Ned's voice hardened.

"And you will not decide that compassion allows you to break these rules."

Johnathan met his eyes.

"Agreed."

Catelyn studied him.

"Do you mean it?"

"Yes."

"You agreed before."

"I know."

"What changes now?"

Johnathan looked toward the raven's message.

"Evidence."

She frowned.

"Of what?"

"That knowing the right thing and doing it are different skills."

No one answered. Ned returned to the table. He placed one hand upon the report from Castle Black.

"The ranging is confirmed."

"Yes."

"The Others may be real."

"They are."

"Benjen is coming."

"Yes."

"Robert is coming."

"Yes."

Ned looked toward the northern window.

"The dead move in one direction. The king rides from another."

Johnathan finally understood how the dangers were converging. The king rode from the south. Benjen rode from the north. Winterfell stood between the crown and the cold. Ned continued.

"We have days, not weeks."

“What will you do?”

“Prepare Winterfell.”

“For Robert?”

“For everything.”

The answer surprised Johnathan. Ned looked toward Jory.

“Double the watch upon the walls after dark. Quietly. Say it is for the king’s arrival.”

Jory nodded.

“Send riders to the nearest holdfasts. Ask whether they have seen deserters, dead animals, unnatural cold, or men behaving strangely.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Do not mention the Others.”

“No.”

Ned turned to Luwin.

“Search every record we possess concerning the Long Night, the Wall, dragonglass, and the ancient Night’s Watch.”

“I will.”

“Prepare a private summary for Benjen.”

“Yes.”

Catelyn spoke.

“And the children?”

“Protected as before.”

“Bran?”

“Watched.”

“Jon?”

Ned’s face tightened.

“With me tonight.”

Catelyn nodded once. Johnathan felt both relief and fear. Ned might tell him something. Or nothing. That choice belonged to them. Not Johnathan. At last.

Ned looked toward him.

“You will remain in your chamber until I summon you.”

Johnathan nodded.

“No medical work?”

“Only if Luwin says a life is in danger.”

“Understood.”

“You will continue writing.”

“Yes.”

“Separate what you know from what you believe.”

“I already began.”

“And add every change your presence causes.”

Johnathan thought of Jon.

“I will.”

Ned lifted the raven’s message.

“This proves you knew the names.”

“Yes.”

“It does not prove the dead rose.”

“No.”

“It does not prove the queen’s children are bastards.”

“No.”

“It does not prove Robert will die.”

“No.”

Ned’s gaze hardened.

“But it proves that dismissing you would be foolish.”

Johnathan did not smile.

“That may be the most trust I have earned.”

“It is not trust.”

“No.”

“It is caution.”

“Caution is a good beginning.”

Ned looked toward the doors.

“So is silence.”

Johnathan accepted the rebuke. Jory escorted him back to the guarded chamber. The walk through Winterfell felt different. People knew about Noll. Several servants nodded to Johnathan. A woman carrying linen stepped aside without making the sign of the Seven. A stable hand called him Doctor Harrow.

No one called him dragon ghost. Not where he could hear. He climbed the stairs of the Great Keep. The guards resumed their

places outside his chamber. The door remained open. Johnathan entered. The room had not changed.

The bed. The fire. The table. The narrow window overlooking Winterfell. A chamber with a view. Not a cell. Not freedom.

Something between them. Johnathan sat at the table and unfolded his parchment. He found the section marked *What has already changed*. Beneath the previous entries, he added: Castle Black confirmed the missing ranging. Benjen is riding south. Ned is investigating the Others before Robert arrives.

Jon suspects the truth of his birth could endanger him. Johnathan stopped. He stared at the final line. More accurate. Still terrible. He moved to the final entry. My own interference.

Beneath it, he wrote: Do not answer private pain merely because silence feels cruel. He waited for the ink to dry. Outside the window, Bran crossed the yard with Summer at his heels. The boy remained on the ground. Jon walked behind him with Ghost. Ned waited near the entrance to the godswood.

Jon saw him. He stopped. Ned gestured for him to come. Johnathan watched father and son disappear beneath the trees. He did not know what Ned would say. For the first time since arriving in Westeros, Johnathan accepted that he should not know. Above the castle, ravens circled in the grey sky.

One had brought proof from the Wall. Another had carried a summons north. Far away, Benjen Stark rode toward Winterfell. Farther north, beyond the Wall's nearly seven hundred feet of ancient ice, pale shapes moved beneath trees where dead men no longer remained dead. To the south, the crowned stag continued along the kingsroad. Robert brought a queen, three royal children, two brothers of House Lannister, hundreds of armed men, and an offer that had once destroyed the Stark family. Between the cold and the crown stood Winterfell.

The wolf had begun to prepare. Johnathan placed the quill beside the parchment. He had prevented one fall. He had confirmed one warning. He had endangered one secret. That was the truth of his first week beneath Stark protection. No prophecy.

No victory. Only choices. Outside, the direwolves began to howl. One voice rose from the yard. Then another. Then a third. The sound spread through Winterfell, ancient and wild.

Johnathan stood at the window and listened. He did not hear thoughts within the howling. He did not feel the story speaking to him. He heard only wolves. For now, that was enough.

CHAPTER 8

THE SHAPE OF A LIE

Seven days later, Winterfell no longer slept. Neither did Johnathan, though that had ceased to be a discovery. He stood at the narrow window of his guarded chamber while servants hurried through the yard below with armfuls of fresh rushes, folded linens, buckets of sand, and enough nervous energy to prepare the castle for a siege rather than a royal visit. Men dragged benches from one hall to another. Women followed behind them, shouting corrections and questioning the intelligence of every man involved. Smoke rose from every chimney.

The kitchens breathed heat and steam into the inner yard until the air smelled of bread, boiling meat, onions, woodsmoke, horse dung, and panic. King Robert remained somewhere upon the kingsroad. His shadow had reached Winterfell before him. Johnathan watched the North prepare to be polite. That frightened him more than swords. He had spent the night at his table rather than pretending his body might eventually surrender to sleep. The unused bed remained cold behind him. Three new headings covered the parchment before him.

Things I know. Things I believe. Things I may have already changed beyond recognition. The third list was becoming uncomfortably long. A horn sounded near the Hunter's Gate. Johnathan looked down. Men upon the wall moved toward the battlements. The gatehouse answered with two shorter calls. Chains rattled, guards shouted, and the outer gate began to open.

Four black-cloaked riders entered Winterfell. Their horses were wet with sweat and road slush. Black wool and boiled leather marked the men as brothers of the Night's Watch. The rider at their head sat lean and straight despite the long journey. His dark hair had been pushed away from a narrow face, and the

black cloak around his shoulders seemed less like clothing than a piece of the northern morning. Benjen Stark. Johnathan watched him ride beneath the gate. The name carried memories of cold forests, missing rangers, blue eyes in the dark, and an unfinished fate somewhere beyond the Wall.

Benjen had left Castle Black nine days earlier and ridden hard upon Ned's summons, changing horses wherever the Watch or House Stark could provide them. He had reached Winterfell before the king. That was one event still following the course Johnathan expected. Almost. In the story he remembered, Benjen had come south because Robert was visiting his family. Here, he had also come because Ned had warned him about missing rangers, a dead deserter, and a pale stranger who knew the names of men lost beyond the Wall. Johnathan reached for the quill and added another line.

Benjen arrived before Robert. Cause altered. Outcome presently similar. A knock sounded against his open door. Maester Luwin entered without waiting for an invitation. He carried folded clothing beneath one arm and disappointment upon his face. That seemed to be his natural expression whenever Johnathan was nearby.

"Good morning," Johnathan said. Luwin looked at the untouched bed.

"You did not sleep."

"No."

"Did you rest?"

"I stopped pretending rest required a mattress."

"That was not my question."

"I don't know whether rest means anything to my body anymore."

Luwin examined his face.

"No redness in the eyes. No slowing of speech. No trembling. No loss of balance."

"I feel exactly the same as yesterday."

"And the day before?"

“Yes.”

“You still find that troubling.”

“People require transitions. Sleep used to end one day and begin another. Now every day feels like the same one getting longer.”

Luwin considered that.

“You may eventually become accustomed to it.”

“That is almost more troubling.”

The maester placed the bundle upon the bed. Johnathan looked at it. The garments were better than the rough grey things he had already been given, though still plain by noble standards. A dark brown wool tunic. Black breeches. Soft leather boots. A belt without ornament.

A charcoal cloak bearing no sigil. Johnathan touched the tunic.

“This is for the king?”

“It is for you.”

“I meant for his arrival.”

“Yes.”

Johnathan held the garment against himself.

“No wolves, dragons, or lions. Very politically neutral.”

“That is the purpose.”

“Am I still allowed to be Doctor Harrow?”

Luwin gave him a flat look.

“You remain Doctor Johnathan Harrow.”

“Good. I was concerned you might turn me into a singer.”

“Can you sing?”

“Not in a manner anyone should reward.”

“Then representing you as a singer would be an unnecessary and easily discovered lie.”

Johnathan nodded.

“I like this plan already.”

Luwin moved closer and lowered his voice.

“The household account remains what Lord Stark established. You are a healer from a distant eastern land beyond the known maps.”

“That part is almost true.”

“You came to White Harbor aboard a merchant vessel.”

“That part is not.”

“You lost your possessions while traveling north.”

“Technically, I lost an entire planet.”

Luwin stared at him. Johnathan sighed.

“Yes. I lost my possessions.”

“The dragon-marked garments were foreign sleeping clothes, not a declaration of loyalty to House Targaryen.”

“That is entirely true.”

“You came under Lord Stark’s protection after I determined that you possessed useful knowledge of healing.”

Johnathan looked toward him.

“You referred to yourself in the third person.”

“I was stating the account.”

“It sounded authoritative.”

“It must.”

Luwin picked up Johnathan’s parchment and examined the newest list.

“You will not volunteer the name Ohio.”

“No volunteering Ohio.”

“You will not mention Earth.”

“No Earth.”

“You will not mention books describing the future.”

“Definitely no books.”

“You will not mention machines, hospitals, electricity, invisible organisms, other worlds, or the strange elderly writer you believe somehow responsible for recording our lives.”

Johnathan considered that final restriction.

“Probably wise.”

“You will not attempt humor with the queen.”

“I was not planning to.”

“You frequently attempt humor when frightened.”

“Then I will try not to be frightened.”

“That is not within your control.”

Johnathan looked at him.

“That was unexpectedly insightful.”

“It was an observation.”

Luwin touched the folded clothing.

“Your story contains enough truth to survive simple questions. Your name is real. You are a healer. You came from farther east than anyone in Winterfell has traveled. You lost everything before reaching our walls.”

“The strongest lie is the one shaped around truth.”

“Yes.”

Johnathan looked toward the window.

“The shape of a lie.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Luwin continued.

“Do not add details.”

“Details make stories convincing.”

“Details make lies fragile.”

Johnathan looked back.

“Explain.”

“A truthful man answers the question he was asked. A frightened liar answers the next six questions before anyone speaks them.”

“That is annoyingly accurate.”

“You are a poor liar because silence frightens you.”

“I use information to make people comfortable.”

“You use information to make yourself comfortable.”

Johnathan opened his mouth. Then closed it. Luwin nodded.

“Improvement.”

Another knock came from the doorway. Robb Stark stood outside. Grey Wind waited behind him. The direwolf pup had grown visibly during Johnathan’s first days at Winterfell. His legs

were longer, his shoulders had begun to broaden, and his paws remained too large for the rest of him. Grey Wind stared at Johnathan. Johnathan stared back. Neither appeared reassured.

“My father wants you in the small hall,” Robb said. Johnathan glanced toward Luwin.

“Is this a good small-hall meeting or a bad small-hall meeting?”

Robb did not smile. Johnathan took the brown tunic from the bed.

“Bad. Understood.”

“You should change first,” Luwin said. Johnathan looked down at the grey wool he already wore.

“Is this offensive?”

“It is stained.”

Johnathan found a faded patch of Noll’s blood near one sleeve.

“Fair.”

Robb waited outside while Johnathan dressed. The brown tunic fit better than the earlier clothing. The boots were nearly his size, and the belt sat comfortably at his waist. When he stepped into the passage, Robb looked him over.

“You appear ordinary.”

Johnathan smiled.

“Thank you.”

“It was not praise.”

“I am taking it as praise.”

They began walking. Luwin followed. The stones beneath their feet carried warmth from Winterfell’s springs. Johnathan had once admired that detail as worldbuilding. Living inside it made the castle feel like a sleeping animal. Warm water moved through the walls as blood should have moved through him. Robb remained silent until they reached the first stair. Then he said, “Jon spoke with Father.”

Johnathan stopped. Robb took two more steps before turning. Luwin watched both of them.

“What did Ned tell him?” Johnathan asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Did Jon tell you?”

“No.”

Robb’s mouth tightened.

“He returned from the godswood angry.”

Johnathan looked down the passage.

“Angry at Ned?”

“At everyone.”

“That sounds understandable.”

“At breakfast, he kept looking at Father. Then at me.”

Robb hesitated.

“As though he expected me to know something.”

“You don’t.”

“No.”

“Keep it that way.”

Robb’s expression hardened.

“He is my brother.”

“Yes.”

“I do not like being told that something about him is too dangerous for me to know.”

“I understand.”

“No, you don’t.”

Johnathan looked at him. Robb was fourteen, a boy expected to become a lord whenever his father was absent. He was an heir surrounded by younger siblings who assumed he could protect them. Now a stranger had arrived with knowledge of their deaths and secrets large enough to frighten Eddard Stark. Robb was being asked to act like a man while everyone treated him as a child whenever the truth became uncomfortable.

“You’re right,” Johnathan said. “I don’t understand what it feels like for you.”

Robb’s anger weakened slightly. Johnathan continued.

“But I know what happens when a person learns a secret before understanding its cost.”

“You.”

“Yes.”

“You arrived shouting them across the yard.”

“Yes.”

“That was foolish.”

“Extremely.”

Robb glanced toward Luwin. The maester gave no sign that he disagreed.

“What did you tell Jon?” Robb asked.

“That his mother is dead. That she loved him. That your father’s silence was never shame.”

Robb stared. Johnathan raised one hand.

“I gave him no name. I did not reveal his parentage, a birth name, or a claim. He guessed that King Robert might be connected to the danger, and my silence told him too much.”

“Father was furious.”

“He was right to be.”

Robb looked toward the window at the end of the passage.

“Jon thinks everyone is keeping his own life from him.”

“They are.”

Robb looked back sharply. Johnathan continued before the boy misunderstood.

“That does not mean the secret is mine to reveal.”

“What should I say to him?”

“Nothing about the secret.”

“He will ask.”

“Then tell him the truth you actually know.”

“What truth?”

“That he is your brother.”

Robb’s face softened.

“Half-brother.”

Johnathan held his gaze.

“Has that ever mattered to you?”

“No.”

“Then do not begin making it matter because adults are frightened.”

Robb looked away. Luwin spoke gently.

“Whatever Lord Stark carries, Jon remains the same boy who sat beside you yesterday.”

Robb nodded once. Not like a child accepting comfort. Like a young lord accepting an instruction. They continued. The small hall stood near the Great Keep, away from the larger rooms being prepared for Robert’s court. Two guards waited outside. One opened the door.

Johnathan entered behind Robb and Luwin. Ned stood near the hearth. Catelyn waited beside a narrow window, wrapped in a dark blue gown and grey cloak. Ser Rodrik Cassel stood at the table, his great white whiskers making his expression appear even more severe than usual. Benjen Stark leaned against the far wall. He had been inside Winterfell for less than an hour. Ned and Luwin had already given him the part of Johnathan’s account that concerned the Night’s Watch, along with enough of the truth about Johnathan’s condition to prevent the meeting from beginning with a drawn sword.

Ser Rodrik had received a narrower account. He knew enough to protect Bran, secure the towers, and understand that Johnathan’s warnings could not be dismissed. He had not been told Jon’s parentage, the truth of the royal children, or every secret Johnathan carried from another world. Road dust and melted frost marked Benjen’s boots. His black cloak remained around his shoulders. He looked thinner than Ned and quicker in the face, with the same long Stark features arranged into a different kind of watchfulness. Ned judged.

Benjen searched. His eyes settled upon Johnathan. The room became quieter. Johnathan looked toward Ser Rodrik.

“Another person in the circle of trust.”

Ned’s face hardened.

“Ser Rodrik has served Winterfell for most of my life.”

Johnathan considered making a joke about qualifications. He chose survival instead.

“Then he seems qualified.”

Ser Rodrik’s white whiskers moved.

“Maester Luwin says you are difficult.”

“Maester Luwin is generous.”

Benjen pushed away from the wall.

“So this is the pale man who knows the names of missing rangers.”

Johnathan faced him.

“Yes.”

“You knew Waymar Royce.”

“I knew of him.”

“You knew Will.”

“Only through what happened to him.”

“You knew Gared.”

“I knew what he tried to warn people about.”

Benjen’s eyes narrowed.

“You say the Others killed Waymar Royce.”

“Yes.”

“And the dead Waymar killed Will.”

“Yes.”

“You did not see this.”

“No.”

“You learned it from an account written in another world.”

Ned had told him more than Johnathan expected. Enough to explain the missing rangers, Johnathan’s impossible source, and the body that behaved too much like the dead. Not Jon’s secret. Not the royal blood. Ned was learning to divide dangerous truths before sharing them. Benjen studied Johnathan’s face.

“You have no breath.”

“I breathe when speaking.”

“No heartbeat.”

“No.”

“You do not sleep.”

“No.”

“And you expect me not to mistake you for one of the dead.”

“I would prefer it.”

Benjen approached. He stopped several feet away.

“The dead have blue eyes.”

“Burning blue. Mine react normally to light. Luwin tested them.”

“The dead are cold.”

“So am I.”

“The dead do not breathe.”

“Neither do I unless I choose.”

Benjen’s hand settled near his sword. Johnathan raised both hands.

“I understand that my defense is not improving.”

The corner of Benjen’s mouth moved. Barely.

“You warned Ned about my missing men.”

“Yes.”

“For that, I will hear you before I reach for steel.”

“That is all I can ask.”

“When the king has gone, you and I will speak of the Wall.”

“Agreed.”

“And dragonglass.”

“Yes.”

Benjen returned to the wall. Ned gestured toward the table. A map of Winterfell lay spread across it. Small stones marked gates, towers, yards, and the royal lodgings.

“The king’s party was seen less than two days south,” Ned said. “They have traveled faster than the last outriders predicted.”

Johnathan’s mouth went dry.

“So we are there.”

Benjen folded his arms.

“There?”

“The part where everyone smiles while everything quietly becomes dangerous.”

Catelyn closed her eyes for half a breath. When she opened them, she was Lady Stark again.

“The royal apartments are prepared. The queen will be housed near the king. Her children will have adjoining chambers. Ser Jaime and Lord Tyrion will remain with the royal household.”

Johnathan looked toward Ned.

“Robert will feast.”

“Yes.”

“He will drink.”

“Yes.”

“He will visit the crypts.”

Ned’s expression changed.

“He does that soon after arriving?”

“Yes. He will want to see Lyanna.”

Catelyn looked toward him. Johnathan immediately wished he had chosen different words. Ned’s voice remained level.

“And after?”

“He offers you the Handship.”

No one gasped or demanded proof. They had begun adapting to him. That might have been more dangerous than disbelief. Ned placed one hand upon the map.

“If Robert makes the offer, I will not answer immediately.”

Johnathan stared.

“You won’t?”

“No.”

A small and dangerous hope moved through him. Catelyn stepped closer to the table.

“A refusal will offend him.”

“A delay will offend him less,” Ned replied.

“Robert does not enjoy waiting,” Benjen said.

“He enjoys being denied even less,” Ser Rodrik added. Ned looked toward them.

“I will tell him the North requires ordering before I can leave it. The disappearances near the Wall give me cause.”

Benjen's expression hardened.

"That part is true."

"The harvest stores need examination," Catelyn said. "The household must be settled. The children cannot be moved south without preparation."

Johnathan looked around the table.

"You are building a delay from truths."

Ned looked at him.

"As we built yours."

The shape of a lie. Johnathan understood. Robert could be delayed without being directly refused. Johnathan could be hidden without disappearing. Truth did not always oppose deception. Sometimes it provided the stones from which deception was built. Ser Rodrik tapped the map.

"The king may still command you."

"He may," Ned said.

"And if he does?" Catelyn asked. Ned looked toward Johnathan.

"I will decide with more knowledge than I possessed before."

That was not a promise to remain north. It was better than blind acceptance. Johnathan nodded.

Catelyn touched the map near the broken tower.

"And Bran?"

The name struck the room harder than any blade. The plan already existed. Robb and Jon were keeping Bran occupied with the direwolves. Ser Rodrik's men had begun watching the towers under the excuse of preparing Winterfell for strangers. The royal party's sudden speed had made every protection feel too thin. Ser Rodrik placed two stones near the broken tower.

"Four men watch the approaches in changing pairs. None were present when Doctor Harrow was found. They have been told to look for thieves, curious servants, and royal men wandering where they should not."

"Do they know Bran is the true concern?" Catelyn asked.

"No."

“Good.”

Ned looked toward Robb.

“Has he remained with you?”

“Most of the time.”

“Most?”

Robb hesitated.

“He went looking for the bell tower this morning.”

Catelyn went pale. Ser Rodrik’s whiskers bristled.

“My men turned him away.”

“Did they frighten him?” Catelyn asked.

“They told him loose stones were being repaired.”

Johnathan looked at Robb.

“Did he believe them?”

“No.”

“Of course not.”

“He complained to the guards. Then he came looking for Father.”

Footsteps sounded outside. Small and fast. A boy’s voice rose in the passage. One of the guards answered. The voice became louder. The door opened before anyone inside could command it shut. Bran Stark entered with red cheeks, windblown hair, and fury bright in his eyes.

“Father.”

Catelyn crossed the room at once.

“Bran.”

“They will not let me climb the bell tower.”

The room became perfectly still. Johnathan felt something inside him attempt to leave his body despite the apparent impossibility. Ser Rodrik cleared his throat.

“My men were following my order.”

Bran looked from the old knight to Ned.

“I always climb it.”

“Not while the king is here,” Ned said.

“He is not here yet.”

“He will be.”

“That does not make the stones different.”

Johnathan had to admire the argument. Catelyn knelt before Bran. Her hands settled upon his shoulders too quickly and too tightly. Bran noticed.

“Mother?”

She loosened her grip.

“My sweet boy, the castle will soon be filled with strangers. Hundreds of men, horses, wagons, servants, knights, and squires. Many of them will not know Winterfell’s ways.”

“I know the ways.”

“They do not.”

“I won’t fall.”

Catelyn’s face changed. Only slightly. Johnathan saw the fear break through. Bran saw it too.

“Why would I fall?”

“You may not,” Johnathan said before Catelyn was forced to answer. “But someone below you might.”

Every face turned toward him. Johnathan continued carefully.

“A loose stone could strike a servant. You might startle a horse from above. A man unfamiliar with the castle might see you climbing and think you are a thief.”

Bran frowned.

“I don’t look like a thief.”

“You are small, fast, and frequently somewhere you were not expected.”

“That does not make me a thief.”

“No. It makes you extremely inconvenient.”

Benjen looked down to hide a smile. Ned did not. Bran turned back to his father.

“It is not fair.”

“No,” Catelyn whispered. “It is not.”

Children always looked toward the parent they believed might rescue them from the other. Bran looked at Ned. Ned’s face remained calm. Johnathan saw the pain beneath it.

“Your mother is right,” Ned said. “Until the royal party leaves, you will stay away from the walls and towers.”

“All of them?”

“All.”

Bran’s face fell.

“You are needed elsewhere,” Ned continued. Bran looked suspicious.

“Where?”

Robb stepped forward.

“With Summer.”

Bran glanced toward his brother. Robb spoke more confidently now.

“When the king arrives, there will be hundreds of horses inside and outside the walls. The direwolves may frighten them.”

“They are not frightened of horses.”

“The horses are frightened of them.”

Bran considered that.

“Grey Wind listens to me,” Robb said. “Ghost listens to Jon. Summer listens best to you.”

Bran attempted to hide how pleased this made him. He failed.

“Father needs us to keep the pups calm and away from the royal horses,” Robb continued. “It is important.”

“Will the king see them?”

“Perhaps.”

“Will he be frightened?”

Benjen answered.

“Robert rode at Rhaegar upon the Trident with a warhammer in his own hand. I doubt a wolf pup will frighten him.”

“Summer is not a puppy.”

“Tell Summer that.”

Bran looked toward the door as though expecting the direwolf to defend his honor. Then he noticed Johnathan. His eyes narrowed with curiosity.

“Are you Doctor Harrow?”

Johnathan bowed. Not too low. Luwin had made him practice.

“I am.”

“You don’t look like a healer.”

“That is unfair. I am wearing my best brown tunic.”

Bran stepped closer. Catelyn’s hand remained near his shoulder.

“What does a healer look like?”

“Usually tired.”

“You do not look tired.”

“I have an unfair advantage.”

Luwin gave him a warning glance. Johnathan corrected himself.

“I rest well.”

That was not technically true. Bran looked unconvinced.

“You are the pale doctor.”

“I have been called worse.”

“Did you save Noll’s leg?”

“Maester Luwin, Hullen, and I treated it together.”

“Will he walk?”

“We believe so.”

Bran glanced at Luwin.

“He says you make everyone wash their hands.”

“I do.”

“Even when they are already clean?”

“Especially when they think they are already clean.”

“That sounds annoying.”

“It is one of my greatest gifts.”

Bran looked around the room.

“Why are you here?”

Johnathan felt every adult silently warn him to choose wisely.

“Lord Stark asked for my knowledge of healing.”

“That is all?”

“No.”

Ned’s eyes hardened. Johnathan continued quickly.

“I also know histories from distant lands and a few from Westeros.”

Bran's interest sharpened.

"What histories?"

"Old kings, lost princes, great knights, and foolish promises."

"Do you know stories?"

"Doctors know many stories."

"Why?"

"Because frightened patients require distraction."

"I am not frightened."

"I did not say you were."

Bran stepped closer.

"What story?"

Johnathan glanced at Ned. Ned's stare could have cut bread. Johnathan searched for something distant enough to be safe. No current secrets. No prophecies. No broken towers. No golden twins.

No Summerhall. That final thought brought one story forward.

"A prince, a woman from the riverlands, a broken betrothal, an angry lord, and a knight so tall that people apparently gave up trying to invent a better name for him."

Bran's eyes brightened.

"What prince?"

"Prince Duncan Targaryen."

Ned remained watchful. Johnathan continued slowly.

"Duncan was the eldest son of King Aegon the Fifth. He was heir to the Iron Throne and Prince of Dragonstone."

"Was he tall?"

"No. That was the other Duncan."

"There were two?"

"Yes. History enjoys making things unnecessarily confusing."

Benjen's mouth moved faintly. Johnathan went on.

"Prince Duncan was promised to the daughter of Lord Lyonel Baratheon, the Lord of Storm's End. Lyonel was called the Laughing Storm, and he was one of the strongest warriors of his time."

“Did the prince love his daughter?”

“No.”

“Then why was he going to marry her?”

“Because princes do not always marry for love. Marriages can bind houses, prevent wars, settle debts, and create alliances.”

Bran frowned.

“That sounds miserable.”

“It often was.”

“What happened?”

“Prince Duncan met Jenny of Oldstones.”

Bran recognized the name.

“The woman with flowers in her hair?”

“The same.”

“Was she a lady?”

“Not by birth. No one knew her family with certainty. She was a strange woman from the riverlands, and some claimed she had the blood of the children of the forest.”

Bran’s eyes widened.

“Did she?”

“Probably not.”

“That makes the story worse.”

“It makes the history more accurate.”

“Stories are better.”

Johnathan nodded.

“Frequently.”

“Did Duncan love her?”

“Yes.”

“Did she love him?”

“So the singers say.”

“What did he do?”

“He married her.”

Bran looked delighted.

“He broke the betrothal?”

“Yes.”

“Could he do that?”

“He was a prince. Princes can do many things.”

“Then there was no trouble.”

Johnathan shook his head.

“Princes can do many things. That does not mean the consequences disappear.”

Bran looked even more interested.

“King Aegon ordered Duncan to put Jenny aside. The High Septon, the Grand Maester, and the small council demanded that the prince choose between Jenny and the Iron Throne.”

“What did he choose?”

“Jenny.”

The answer quieted the room.

“He surrendered Dragonstone and renounced his claim to the crown. His younger brother Jaehaerys became the heir instead.”

“He gave up being king?”

“Yes.”

“For her?”

“Yes.”

Bran thought about this with the seriousness only children could give to impossible choices.

“What happened to Lord Baratheon?”

“He was furious. His daughter had been promised a future king. House Baratheon had been humiliated before the entire realm.”

“What did he do?”

“He renounced his allegiance to the Iron Throne and had himself crowned as a new Storm King.”

Benjen nodded slightly. He knew the history.

“A rebellion followed,” Johnathan continued. “It was short and bloody.”

“Did Prince Duncan fight him?”

“No. The other Duncan did.”

“The tall one?”

“Ser Duncan the Tall, a knight of the Kingsguard and an old companion of King Aegon.”

“What happened?”

“Ser Duncan faced Lord Lyonel in a trial by battle and defeated him.”

“Killed him?”

“No.”

Bran looked disappointed.

“That helped make peace possible.”

“How did they make peace?”

“King Aegon promised that his youngest daughter, Princess Rhaelle, would marry Lord Lyonel’s heir.”

Bran frowned.

“Another marriage.”

“History often solves the problems caused by one marriage with another marriage.”

“That is stupid.”

“It is extremely traditional.”

Catelyn almost smiled. Almost.

“What happened to Jenny?” Bran asked.

“She was eventually accepted at court by courtesy. People called her Lady Jenny. She and Prince Duncan were remembered in songs for many years.”

“Were they happy?”

Johnathan hesitated. Summerhall waited at the end of that road, filled with fire, smoke, and the ruins of a king’s dream. A prince and his lady had died together beneath collapsing stone. He would not place that inside Bran’s mind.

“Duncan loved her enough to surrender a crown,” Johnathan said. “That is the part of their story worth remembering today.”

Bran considered this. Then he nodded.

“That is a good story.”

“It is an incomplete one.”

“You have to tell the rest.”

“Not today.”

Bran’s face fell.

“Why?”

“Because I require payment.”

Catelyn’s eyes narrowed.

“What payment?”

Johnathan looked at Bran.

“One story for each day you remain away from the towers until the king leaves.”

Bran stared at him.

“That is not fair.”

“No,” Johnathan said. “It is a negotiation.”

“I could hear stories from Old Nan without paying.”

“Old Nan is a kinder person.”

Bran looked toward Ned.

“Can he do that?”

Ned studied Johnathan. Then he looked at Bran.

“If you agree.”

Bran considered his options.

“How long will the king stay?”

“No one knows,” Ned said.

“That could be many stories.”

“It could.”

“One story every day?”

Johnathan nodded.

“One.”

“Not short ones.”

“Reasonably sized.”

“No stories about turnips.”

“I had not planned any.”

“No stories where everyone dies before anything happens.”

“That removes a surprising amount of northern history.”

Bran folded his arms.

“One full story every day, and I stay off the towers until the royal party leaves.”

Catelyn’s breath caught. Johnathan looked toward Ned. There it was. A childish bargain. A desperate bargain. Perhaps the best protection they possessed. Johnathan held out his hand.

Bran looked at it. Catelyn nearly intervened. Then Bran placed his smaller hand inside Johnathan's cold one. His expression changed. Johnathan released him immediately.

"Sorry."

"You are cold."

"I know."

"Colder than outside."

"Yes."

Bran looked fascinated rather than frightened. That was not ideal.

"Is that your illness?"

"Part of it."

"Does it hurt?"

"No."

"Can it be cured?"

"I don't know."

Bran nodded as though adding the matter to a list of future questions.

"Then we have a bargain."

"We do."

Bran looked pleased with himself. He had surrendered every tower in Winterfell and somehow believed he had won. Perhaps he had. Robb guided him toward the door.

"Come. Summer is waiting."

At the threshold, Bran looked back.

"Tomorrow I want a story about Ser Duncan the Tall."

Johnathan smiled.

"I know several."

"Did he fight monsters?"

"Mostly people."

"People are not monsters."

The room became quiet. Johnathan looked at the adults surrounding him.

"Sometimes they come close."

Catelyn's expression hardened. Johnathan corrected himself.

“But tomorrow will be one of the better stories.”

Bran accepted that and left with Robb. The door closed. No one spoke for several breaths. Benjen exhaled.

“The boy has you now.”

Johnathan sat upon the nearest bench without being invited.

“My negotiating position could have been stronger.”

Catelyn remained focused upon the door.

“He had already gone to climb.”

“Yes.”

“He was turned away today,” Benjen said.

“Today,” Catelyn repeated. Ned looked toward Ser Rodrik.

“Continue the watches.”

“I will.”

“Change the men frequently. No one is to appear interested in Bran.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Keep ladders and repair crews near the broken tower. Make the watch look ordinary.”

Ser Rodrik nodded.

“Robb and Jon will keep Bran with the wolves whenever possible,” Ned continued. “The guards will prevent him reaching the upper walls without making a scene.”

Catelyn looked at Johnathan.

“How many days must we survive?”

Johnathan wished she had asked anything else. She could have asked about dragons, medicine, football, microwaves, or whether Ohio possessed knights. Anything but that.

“I don’t know.”

Catelyn’s eyes tightened.

“That is the problem. I know what happened when no one interfered. Now everyone is making different choices.”

Luwin folded his hands.

“Different choices may produce better results.”

“Yes.”

“Or worse ones.”

Johnathan looked at him.

“Yes.”

The answer came too quickly and too honestly. Everyone heard it. Johnathan stood.

“I will not pretend this is safe. Preventing Bran’s fall may change what Jaime and Cersei do. They may never enter the tower. They may become more cautious, more desperate, or simply choose another place. They may do nothing at all.”

Catelyn’s face paled at the names. Johnathan continued.

“I know the chain of events that occurred without me. I do not know the chain we are creating now.”

Ned stepped closer.

“You will say that whenever you are uncertain.”

“Yes.”

“You will not present belief as knowledge.”

“No.”

“You will not guess merely because silence makes you uncomfortable.”

Johnathan thought of Luwin’s lesson.

“No.”

Ned held his gaze. Johnathan finally understood something important. Ned was not angry because Johnathan possessed knowledge. Ned was angry because certainty carried authority. A confident mistake could kill people as easily as a deliberate lie, and perhaps more easily.

“I understand,” Johnathan said. Ned’s expression did not soften.

“You are beginning to.”

The door opened. Robb returned without Bran.

“He is with Summer,” Robb said. “Two of Ser Rodrik’s men are nearby. Bran believes they are watching for horse thieves.”

Ser Rodrik nodded.

“Good.”

Robb looked toward Johnathan.

“He wants the next story now.”

“Of course he does.”

“I told him tomorrow.”

“Thank you.”

“He said agreements begin immediately.”

Johnathan rubbed his forehead.

“He is going to become a dangerous negotiator.”

“He is seven,” Catelyn said.

“That is what makes it worse.”

Benjen leaned against the wall again.

“The stories may work.”

Catelyn looked at him.

“Bran will fight guards, test doors, and search for another path if he believes something has been taken from him.”

Her eyes moved toward Johnathan.

“But if he believes he has won something, he may obey.”

“One story for each day upon the ground,” Benjen said.

“Earthbound,” Johnathan muttered. Benjen frowned.

“What?”

“Groundbound, towerless, and alive. Choose whichever sounds least strange.”

Ned ignored that.

“You will keep Bran occupied with old histories.”

Johnathan nodded.

“Safe ones.”

“There are no entirely safe histories.”

“Then choose those least connected to present dangers.”

“No current royal secrets.”

“No.”

“No stories concerning Jon.”

“Never.”

“No stories about the queen or her children.”

“Absolutely not.”

“No Jaime Lannister.”

Johnathan swallowed.

“No.”

Catelyn stepped closer.

“And you will not frighten Bran.”

“I won’t.”

“He will ask why you dislike towers.”

“I will tell him I dislike heights.”

“You do not fear falling.”

“I fear becoming solid halfway through the ground.”

Everyone stared at him. Johnathan sighed.

“Another subject for another day.”

“You will tell Bran nothing about your abilities,” Ned said.

“Agreed.”

Catelyn’s voice lowered.

“He is curious. He will ask.”

“I will give him adventure, not warnings.”

Luwin looked thoughtful.

“This arrangement may support Doctor Harrow’s public identity.”

Ned turned toward him.

“How?”

“A foreign healer entertaining a restless child with old histories appears less suspicious than a guarded stranger standing silently in corners.”

Johnathan looked at Luwin.

“So being useful is my disguise.”

“Being ordinary is your disguise.”

“That may be more difficult.”

Ned pointed toward the map.

“When the king arrives, you will stand beside Maester Luwin among the household retainers.”

Johnathan’s stomach tightened.

“In the yard?”

“Yes.”

“I thought hiding me might be safer.”

“You have been seen by half the castle. Hiding you now would make your absence noticeable. If you later appear, questions will follow.”

“That makes sense in a terrifying way.”

“You will bow when the household bows.”

“I have been practicing.”

“You will not speak unless spoken to.”

“That is becoming a theme.”

“If Robert asks who you are, you are Doctor Johnathan Harrow, a foreign healer assisting Maester Luwin.”

“Correct.”

“If he asks where you come from?”

“A distant eastern land beyond the known maps.”

“If he asks its name?”

Johnathan hesitated. Luwin answered.

“A small country unknown to Westerosi sailors.”

“That seems suspicious,” Johnathan said.

“Then tell him its name.”

“Ohio.”

Everyone looked at him. Benjen’s eyebrows rose.

“That is truly the name?”

“Yes.”

“It sounds like someone being struck in the stomach.”

“Many people have observed that.”

Ned considered the matter.

“You may say Ohio if directly asked.”

Johnathan blinked.

“Really?”

“A false name may be remembered and questioned. The true one means nothing to anyone here.”

Luwin nodded reluctantly.

“That alters my earlier instruction. You will not volunteer the name, but you may use it if directly pressed.”

“No volunteering Ohio. Direct questions only.”

“Do not describe its location beyond the eastern maps.”

“No Earth.”

“No other worlds.”

“No indoor plumbing.”

Luwin closed his eyes briefly.

“Especially no indoor plumbing.”

Benjen looked between them.

“I will regret asking.”

“Yes,” Luwin said. Ned continued.

“If the king asks why you are in Winterfell, you were found ill near the walls and have since aided Luwin.”

“That is close enough to true.”

“If the queen asks?”

The room cooled. Johnathan did not like the question. Cersei Lannister asking about an unknown man was how unknown men became corpses.

“If the queen asks, I am boring.”

Catelyn frowned.

“Boring.”

“Painfully boring. I treat cuts, fevers, broken bones, and stomach complaints. I know nothing of politics. I have never seen a dragon, never met a Targaryen, and remain grateful to Lord Stark while being terrified of everyone important.”

Benjen smiled faintly.

“Can you manage looking terrified?”

“That part may not require acting.”

Ned studied him.

“That may be the wisest answer you have given.”

“Thank you. I think.”

“You will not look closely at Jaime or Cersei.”

“No.”

“You will not look at their children as though examining evidence.”

Johnathan had not considered that.

“Right.”

“You will not stare at Tyrion Lannister.”

Johnathan frowned.

“Why Tyrion?”

“Because you reacted to his name.”

Johnathan looked away. Tyrion had not committed the crimes approaching Winterfell. He had no knowledge of Bran’s future fall. He would arrive with jokes, books, insecurities, and a family that treated him as an embarrassment. Johnathan already liked him. That alone was dangerous.

“I will not stare.”

“You will not attempt to warn him.”

“Not yet.”

Ned’s expression hardened. Johnathan corrected himself.

“I will not warn him during the arrival.”

“Better.”

Ser Rodrik touched one of the stones marking the gate.

“My men will keep royal guards away from the restricted towers. They will say the masonry is unsafe.”

“It is unsafe,” Robb said.

“Another useful truth,” Johnathan replied. Catelyn looked toward Luwin.

“No raven leaves Winterfell concerning Doctor Harrow, Bran, or these preparations.”

Luwin appeared faintly offended.

“My lady, I had no intention of sending one.”

“I know.”

Her voice was gentle. The command beneath it was not. Luwin bowed his head.

“As you say.”

Ned looked toward Johnathan.

“Learn your account.”

“I will.”

“Not well enough to impress. Well enough to avoid attention.”

Johnathan nodded.

“That I may be able to do.”

The moment he said it, he wondered whether it was another lie. He had arrived wearing Targaryen pajamas, survived blows without injury, allowed men to see his flesh vanish, and passed through stone in the Great Hall. He had also told the Starks secrets capable of breaking kingdoms. Disappearing into a royal crowd seemed optimistic. Benjen pushed away from the wall.

“You still owe me an explanation of dragonglass.”

“I know.”

“And the Others.”

“Yes.”

“And why you resemble them more closely than any living man I have encountered.”

Johnathan looked at him.

“That may take longer.”

“After the king.”

“After the king.”

Benjen gave him one final measuring look and left with Ser Rodrik. Robb followed. Luwin gathered the map and several notes but remained near the table. Catelyn did not move. Ned stood beside the hearth. Johnathan suddenly felt as though the room had become much smaller. Catelyn spoke.

“You will not tell Bran stories about falling boys.”

“No.”

“Or broken towers.”

“No.”

“Or golden men who smile before killing children.”

Her voice trembled upon the final word. Johnathan rose slowly.

“I will not.”

“He will ask why everyone is watching him.”

“I will tell him the royal visit makes the castle dangerous.”

“He may not accept that.”

“Then I will distract him.”

“With what?”

“Ser Duncan the Tall, Baelor Breakspear, a foolish hedge knight, or a prince who loses his horse and must walk home.”

Ned almost smiled.

“That sounds dreadful.”

“Exactly. Safe and forgettable.”

Catelyn did not smile.

“Do you know harmless stories?”

Johnathan considered the fairy tales from his childhood. Many involved children eaten by witches, girls poisoned by jealous queens, wolves consuming grandmothers, and parents abandoning children in forests.

“Fewer than I believed.”

“Then make some.”

“I will.”

Catelyn studied him.

“When you look at Bran, you look guilty.”

Johnathan had no answer. She did not wait for one. Catelyn left. The door closed behind her. Ned remained near the fire. Luwin quietly gathered his final parchment and stepped into the passage, leaving the door partly open. For several moments, Ned and Johnathan stood alone.

Outside, Winterfell continued preparing for a king.

“My wife is strong,” Ned said.

“I know.”

Ned looked at him. Johnathan remembered how much the phrase irritated him. He corrected himself.

“I am beginning to understand.”

“She is also frightened.”

“Yes.”

“She believes every tower now contains the image you placed in her mind.”

Johnathan looked toward the fire.

“I wish I could remove it.”

“So do I.”

Ned's voice held no accusation. That made the words worse. Johnathan folded his hands behind his back.

"I thought warning you would be the difficult part."

"What did you believe would follow?"

"You would believe me, make a good plan, and prevent everything."

Ned's expression remained still.

"You believed knowledge would make choices simple."

"Yes."

"It rarely does."

"I am learning."

"Learn faster."

Johnathan nodded.

"I will."

Ned approached the door. Before leaving, he stopped.

"You said different choices might produce worse consequences."

"Yes."

"Do you regret warning us?"

Johnathan looked toward the window. Bran was somewhere below with Summer, walking through the yard, laughing, and still alive.

"No."

Ned followed his gaze.

"Neither do I."

Then he left. By midday, Winterfell had swallowed Johnathan into its chosen account. He was Doctor Johnathan Harrow, a healer from a distant eastern country called Ohio. He had crossed the narrow sea aboard a merchant vessel and lost his possessions during the journey north. A rare illness had left him pale and cold. Maester Luwin had taken an interest in his medical knowledge, and Lord Stark had placed him under protection. Every sentence contained some portion of the truth. Together, they formed a lie. Luwin made him repeat the account until Johnathan stopped explaining too much.

“What brought you to White Harbor?” Luwin asked.

“A merchant ship.”

“What was its name?”

Johnathan hesitated. Luwin struck the table lightly with two fingers.

“You do not know.”

“But I should know the name of the ship I traveled upon.”

“Only if asked by someone who has reason to care.”

“What if Robert cares?”

“King Robert does not care about merchant ships.”

“What if Tyrion asks?”

Luwin paused. That was more plausible. Johnathan continued.

“I need a ship name.”

“No.”

“I absolutely need one.”

“You will invent a name and then invent a captain, a port, a cargo, a storm, three sailors, and the captain’s unhappy marriage.”

“That is fair.”

“If Lord Tyrion asks, say the name means nothing in Westeros and that the ship has already sailed.”

“That sounds evasive.”

“It is evasive.”

“People notice evasion.”

“They also notice elaborate falsehoods.”

Johnathan leaned back.

“I am very bad at lying.”

“Yes.”

“I came from a world with searchable records.”

“I do not know what that means.”

“It means our mistakes followed us.”

“They do here as well.”

Luwin returned to the questions.

“Why did you come north?”

“To seek work.”

“What kind?”

“Healing.”

“Why Winterfell?”

“I did not intend to reach Winterfell. I became lost after leaving the kingsroad.”

“How did you lose your possessions?”

“Robbers.”

“How many?”

Johnathan opened his mouth. Luwin raised one hand.

“You do not know.”

“I was present.”

“You were frightened.”

“I do not become unconscious.”

“They struck you.”

“It would not hurt.”

“They took you by surprise.”

“My skin is extremely difficult to damage.”

Luwin stared at him. Johnathan rubbed his face.

“This is why I am bad at lying.”

“The account does not need to survive a trial before the Citadel. It needs to discourage casual curiosity.”

“What happens when casual curiosity belongs to Tyrion Lannister?”

“Answer fewer questions.”

“He will notice.”

“Then appear ashamed.”

“Of what?”

“Being robbed.”

“I am not ashamed.”

“Pretend.”

Johnathan looked toward the ceiling.

“Can we return to medicine?”

“No.”

Luwin pointed toward him.

“Who are you?”

“Doctor Johnathan Harrow.”

“From?”

“Ohio, a small country beyond the eastern maps.”

“How did you reach Westeros?”

“By merchant ship to White Harbor.”

“Why did you travel north?”

“To seek work as a healer.”

“What happened?”

“I was robbed and became lost near the wolfswood.”

“What were the dragon garments?”

“Foreign sleeping clothes. They have no political meaning.”

“Why are you cold?”

“A rare illness.”

“Can it spread?”

“No.”

“Are you dangerous?”

Johnathan paused. Luwin waited.

“To others through illness? No.”

“That answer invites further questions.”

“I cannot honestly say I am not dangerous.”

“You can say you mean no harm.”

“That is true.”

“Then say it.”

Johnathan nodded.

“I mean no harm.”

Luwin studied him.

“That may be the most convincing part.”

A horn sounded from the outer wall. Johnathan froze. Luwin turned his head. A second horn answered. Then a third. It was not the long alarm of attack. It was a signal.

Riders approaching. Men began shouting in the yard below. Johnathan moved to the window before he could stop himself. Across Winterfell, servants paused. Guards turned toward the walls, stable boys ran between the yards, and a man upon the

battlements waved a grey banner toward the gatehouse. Luwin came to stand beside Johnathan.

“Royal outriders,” the maester said.

“How do you know?”

“The horn pattern.”

Beyond the walls, black birds lifted from the trees in a sudden cloud. Johnathan’s mouth went dry. Below, Robb appeared in the yard with Bran beside him. Summer bounded at Bran’s heels. Grey Wind remained close to Robb. Jon emerged from another passage with Ghost. For one strange moment, all three boys and all three wolves stood together beneath the grey sky, alive and waiting.

Johnathan gripped the stone ledge. Bran was not upon a tower. Not today. Perhaps that mattered.

Perhaps it had only moved the danger somewhere else. From the far side of Winterfell came another horn, longer and closer. Luwin looked at Johnathan.

“Remember who you are.”

Johnathan watched Ned cross the yard toward the gate. Catelyn emerged from the Great Keep, every trace of private fear concealed beneath a lady’s composure. Robb drew Bran gently away from the rush of servants. Jon stood a little apart with Ghost pressed against his leg, unaware of why a royal visit frightened his father more than it pleased him. Johnathan drew in a breath he did not require. The air carried woodsmoke, damp wool, cold stone, fresh snow, and the sharp edge of fear.

“I am Doctor Johnathan Harrow.”

“From?”

“Ohio, a distant land beyond the eastern maps.”

“Why are you here?”

“To assist Maester Luwin.”

“What do you know of politics?”

“Nothing useful.”

“What do you know of the future?”

Johnathan looked at him. Luwin's expression remained severe. Johnathan understood the final test.

"Nothing I would speak of."

The maester nodded. Below, the gates began to open. Mounted men entered beneath banners bearing the crowned stag. They were only outriders. The king remained behind them. The lions remained behind him. But they were coming.

Johnathan looked down at the ordinary brown wool covering his body. It bore no dragons, strange stitching, or visible mark of the world he had lost. The lie had been constructed carefully around the surviving pieces of truth. He was a doctor from far away who had lost his home and meant no harm. Everything else remained buried beneath that account, including his abilities, the books, the future, the dead moving beyond the Wall, the royal children's blood, and the secret carried by Jon Snow. Johnathan was not a god entering a story to command it.

He was a frightened physician standing inside a living world, attempting to keep one mistake from becoming the next disaster. A poor liar in borrowed clothes. A dangerous man pretending to be harmless. Below, Bran reached down and placed one hand upon Summer's head. He remained upon the ground. For now, that was enough. The royal outriders crossed the inner yard, and Winterfell opened its gates to the first men of the crowned stag.

Somewhere upon the kingsroad behind them, the king and the lions continued north.

CHAPTER 9

THE LAST QUIET DAY

Johnathan learned that freedom in Winterfell still possessed walls. They were not made of iron. No chain circled his wrists. His chamber door remained unlocked, and the guards outside no longer placed hands upon their swords whenever he approached it. Yet he could not leave without telling someone where he intended to go. He could cross the inner yard while accompanied by Maester Luwin or one of Lord Stark's trusted men. He could help treat the sick and injured. He could speak with servants who had begun calling him the pale doctor and, less respectfully, Lord Soap.

He could even speak with the Stark children. He simply could not tell them anything important. He could not speak of their futures, Jon's parentage, murdered Hands, royal bastards, dead men walking beyond the Wall, or ancient sorcerers buried beneath trees. Johnathan was no longer a prisoner. He was not free either. He was Doctor Johnathan Harrow of Ohio, a small and conveniently obscure country beyond the eastern maps. He had reached White Harbor aboard a merchant vessel, lost his possessions upon the road, and become separated from every person capable of confirming the account.

The lie had been constructed from enough truth to remain standing. His name was real. Ohio was real. He was a physician. He had lost everything. The remaining details had been added because telling King Robert Baratheon that Johnathan had fallen out of another world while wearing dragon-covered pajamas seemed politically unwise. Johnathan stood before the narrow window of his chamber and watched the royal outriders take possession of small pieces of Winterfell.

They had entered the previous afternoon. Only forty men had come, along with several wagons, fresh instructions from the

king's steward, and enough confidence to behave as though the castle had already become part of the royal camp. They occupied corners of the stable yard. They argued over fodder, sleeping arrangements, firewood, and which horses deserved the driest stalls. Their red cloaks and polished buckles looked too bright against Winterfell's dark stone. Southern color had entered the castle before the southern court.

King Robert remained half a day away. According to the latest rider, the royal party had made camp south of Winterfell and would arrive sometime after sunrise. This was the final day before the old story reached the gates. Johnathan looked down at his clothing. The dark brown tunic Luwin had given him fit properly. The black breeches and plain boots made him look respectable without suggesting wealth. His charcoal cloak carried no wolf, dragon, lion, stag, or other animal likely to begin a political argument. He looked like what he claimed to be.

A foreign healer sheltered by a northern lord. That was much better than looking like a poor singer who could not sing. A knock sounded against the open door. Maester Luwin entered carrying his leather medical case. He examined Johnathan from head to foot. Johnathan waited. Luwin continued looking.

"Is something wrong?"

"Turn around."

Johnathan turned. The maester examined the back of the cloak.

"No hidden dragons," Johnathan said.

"That was not my concern."

"What was?"

"The stitching beneath the right shoulder was coming loose yesterday."

Johnathan reached back and failed to find it.

"It has been repaired," Luwin said.

"By whom?"

"One of Lady Stark's women."

"That was kind."

“She did not consider it kindness. She considered it necessary to keep you from appearing neglected before the king.”

“I will treasure the distinction.”

Luwin looked toward the cold bed.

“You did not attempt to sleep.”

“No.”

“Good.”

Johnathan stared at him.

“That may be the first time you have approved of my sleeplessness.”

“I approved of your decision to stop performing a useless ritual merely because it once belonged to your life.”

“That sounded almost compassionate.”

“It was practical.”

“There you are.”

Luwin did not answer. Something about his silence changed the room. Johnathan looked more closely at him. The maester’s grey robes had been dressed hastily. His chain sat crooked across one shoulder. A faint red stain marked his right sleeve. Not blood from an old patient. Fresh blood.

“What happened?”

“A woman is laboring in the servants’ birthing chamber.”

“How long?”

“Since yesterday morning.”

Johnathan’s expression changed.

“How long since her waters broke?”

“Before dawn.”

“Bleeding?”

“Very little.”

“Fever?”

“Not yet.”

“Is the child presenting headfirst?”

Luwin hesitated.

“No.”

“Breech?”

“The midwife believes a shoulder is against the opening.”

Johnathan was already moving toward the door.

“The baby is transverse.”

“I do not know that word.”

“Lying sideways.”

“Yes.”

“How dilated is she?”

Luwin stared. Johnathan corrected himself.

“How open is the mouth of the womb?”

“Nearly or completely. Goodwife Mella could not be certain.”

“Can she feel a hand or arm?”

“A shoulder and perhaps the ribs.”

Johnathan stopped. A shoulder presentation after the membranes had ruptured, with labor continuing and no progress, meant the child could not pass through the pelvis. Not without turning. Not through ordinary birth.

“Has anyone tried to move the baby?”

“Goodwife Mella attempted to turn it from outside. I attempted the same. The child would not move.”

“Did you reach inside?”

“No. The contractions were too strong, and I feared tearing the womb.”

That had been a reasonable decision. Johnathan took the medical case from him.

“Take me to her.”

Two guards fell into step behind them. They descended quickly through the Great Keep. Johnathan felt no fatigue, but Luwin’s breathing had become louder by the time they crossed the lower passage.

“How old is she?”

“Twenty-three.”

“First child?”

“Second. The first was born without difficulty.”

“Is the first child large or small?”

“A girl of four years. Ordinary size.”

“Any previous bleeding, seizures, or fever during this pregnancy?”

“None known.”

“Has the baby moved today?”

“Less than yesterday.”

Johnathan walked faster. The birthing chamber was warm enough to make the stone walls sweat. A fire burned too high in the hearth. Bowls of water, bloodied cloth, herbs, rushes, and half-used candles crowded every surface. Goodwife Mella stood at the foot of the bed. She was a broad woman in her fifties with sleeves rolled above her elbows and dark hair tied tightly beneath a linen covering. A younger woman assisted her. Two female servants waited near the wall.

The laboring woman lay upon the bed, supported by folded blankets. Her name was Mara. Johnathan had seen her twice in the laundry yard but had never spoken with her. She was small, dark-haired, and grey with exhaustion. Sweat covered her face. Her breathing came rapidly between contractions. Her husband stood near the hearth, twisting a wool cap between his hands. A contraction tightened Mara’s abdomen. She cried out and gripped the sheets.

Goodwife Mella placed one hand against Mara’s shoulder.

“Breathe, girl.”

Mara tried. The contraction continued. Johnathan watched its length and the shape of the abdomen. The upper portion tightened around the child. The lower abdomen remained strangely empty. When the contraction eased, Mara collapsed against the blankets.

“Who is he?” her husband asked.

“Doctor Harrow,” Luwin said.

“The pale man?”

Johnathan ignored that. He placed the medical case beside the bed and addressed Mara directly.

“My name is Johnathan. Maester Luwin asked me to examine you. May I?”

She opened her eyes.

“Can you help my baby?”

“I need to understand what is happening first.”

“Do it.”

Johnathan turned toward the room.

“Everyone who is not assisting needs to leave.”

Mara’s husband stepped forward.

“I stay.”

Johnathan looked at Mara.

“Do you want him here?”

“Yes.”

“He stays. Everyone else outside.”

The two servants left. One of the guards closed the door behind them. Johnathan approached the bed.

“Goodwife Mella, tell me everything from the beginning.”

The midwife studied his face with open distrust.

“I have delivered more children than you have years.”

“I believe you.”

“You ask questions like an apprentice.”

“I am asking because missing one fact can kill both of them.”

That ended the argument. Mella spoke. Mara’s pains had begun the previous morning. They had strengthened during the night. Her waters broke several hours before dawn. The child had not descended. Mara had pushed for nearly two hours because everyone believed the baby would turn or move lower. It had not. The contractions were becoming weaker.

Mara’s pulse was rapid. She was exhausted and beginning to drift between pains. Johnathan washed his hands with soap and warm water. The room watched him. He scrubbed beneath his nails and up both forearms. Goodwife Mella frowned.

“We washed before she began.”

“You have touched cloth, bowls, the bed, and the fire since then.”

“My hands are not filthy.”

“Filth small enough to kill cannot be seen.”

Mella looked toward Luwin. The maester said, "Wash again." She did. Johnathan dried his hands upon a clean piece of boiled linen. He examined Mara's abdomen gently between contractions. The child's head was high beneath the left side of her ribs. The back ran across the upper abdomen.

The lower pelvis contained no head and no breech. The baby was lying sideways. Johnathan found a hollow drinking horn among the birthing supplies.

"What do you want with that?" Mella asked.

"To listen."

He cleaned the narrow end, placed it against Mara's abdomen, and pressed his ear to the wider opening. Luwin watched. Johnathan moved the horn until he found the heartbeat. Fast. Faint. He counted against the small sandglass Luwin carried. The rate slowed during the next contraction and recovered poorly afterward.

Johnathan moved the horn and counted again. Mara's husband stared.

"You can hear the child?"

"Yes."

"What does it say?"

"Nothing. I hear the heart."

Luwin took the horn when Johnathan offered it.

"Place it here."

The maester listened. His brow tightened.

"It is much faster than Mara's."

"It should be. It is also too slow for a healthy unborn child."

"You called it fast."

"Fast compared with an adult. Slow compared with what it should be."

Luwin listened through another contraction. His eyes changed.

"It weakens."

"Yes."

Johnathan looked at Mara.

“I need to examine the birth passage.”

She nodded weakly. Goodwife Mella helped position her. Johnathan used the smallest number of careful movements possible. The opening of the womb was complete. A shoulder was pressed against the pelvis. One arm lay higher inside, trapped alongside the chest. There was no room to turn the child without severe risk of tearing the uterus.

Johnathan withdrew and washed again. Another contraction came. Mara cried out, but the sound carried less strength than before. Her husband knelt beside her.

“Please.”

Johnathan looked at Luwin. The maester understood the question. He shook his head.

“The child cannot pass.”

Mara’s husband stared at him.

“What does that mean?”

Luwin’s voice was quiet.

“It means the child will likely die before birth. If the labor continues, the womb may tear. Mara may bleed inside and die as well.”

“No.”

Mara’s husband stood abruptly.

“You are the maester. Turn it.”

“I cannot.”

“You delivered our daughter.”

“This child lies across the womb. There is no path through the pelvis.”

“Then make one.”

The words struck the room. Mara turned her head toward Johnathan.

“You can.”

It was not a question. She had seen the way Luwin looked at him. Johnathan pulled the stool beside the bed.

“There is an operation.”

Luwin stared at him.

“What operation?”

“I open the abdomen, open the womb, remove the baby, control the bleeding, and close both wounds.”

Goodwife Mella stepped backward. Mara’s husband went still. Luwin spoke carefully.

“The Citadel possesses records of children cut from dead mothers.”

“Mara is not dead.”

“Which is why cutting her open would kill her.”

“Not necessarily.”

“Johnathan.”

“In my world, women survive this operation.”

“How many?”

“Most, when it is performed in a proper hospital with trained teams, reliable anesthesia, sterile equipment, antibiotics, blood for transfusion, and medicines that control bleeding.”

Luwin looked around the chamber. They had none of those things. Johnathan did not pretend otherwise.

“We have soap, boiled water, strong spirits, clean thread, sharp instruments, milk of the poppy, dreamwine, heat, light, and people who can follow directions.”

“You said your hospitals possess more.”

“They do.”

“And without those things?”

“The danger is much greater.”

Mara looked at him.

“If you do nothing?”

Johnathan met her eyes.

“The baby cannot be born in this position. Its heartbeat is weakening. Continued labor may rupture your womb. Without the operation, I believe both of you will die.”

Her husband gripped the bedframe.

“And with it?”

“I may save both of you. I may save one. I may lose both.”

Mara's face tightened as another contraction began. Johnathan waited until it passed. He did not ask the husband. He did not ask Luwin. He asked her.

"Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Do you want me to operate?"

Mara looked toward her husband. Tears covered his face. He pressed his forehead against her hand. She looked back at Johnathan.

"Save my child."

"I will try to save both of you."

"Do it."

Luwin stepped closer.

"You cannot possess every skill you claim."

"I was trained in surgery."

"Childbirth surgery?"

"Not as my primary specialty, but I studied obstetrics, assisted in emergency operations, and know the anatomy."

"You have never performed this alone."

"No."

That truth landed hard. Johnathan continued before fear could fill the silence.

"I have also never attempted it without modern equipment. If you know a safer option, tell me now."

Luwin looked toward Mara. He had none. Johnathan stood.

"Then we prepare."

His voice changed. The uncertainty remained inside him, but no one else had room to carry it.

"Goodwife Mella, we need every clean linen cloth in this part of the castle. Boil them. They remain in the water until I ask for them."

Mella did not move.

"Now."

She moved.

“Maester Luwin, I need your sharpest small knife, your best needles, gut thread for the womb and deeper tissue, stronger thread for the abdominal wall, forceps, and every clean clamp-like instrument you possess.”

“I have no instruments called clamps.”

“Anything that can grip a bleeding vessel without crushing through it.”

“I have forceps used for removing arrow fragments.”

“Bring them.”

Johnathan pointed toward the hearth.

“Three pots of water. Full boil. Instruments and thread go into separate pots. Do not merely warm them.”

Luwin opened his medical case.

“What else?”

“Strong clear spirits.”

“Distilled wine?”

“The strongest available.”

“Milk of the poppy?”

“Yes, and the sleeping draught used before amputations.”

Luwin looked at him.

“It can stop breathing.”

“That is why you will measure it and remain at her head.”

Johnathan turned toward Mara’s husband.

“What is your name?”

“Gerren.”

“Gerren, I need you to listen carefully. Your wife needs you calm.”

“I am calm.”

“You are crushing her fingers.”

Gerren released her hand.

“I am sorry.”

“You will stay near her head until she sleeps. Speak to her. Do not touch anything near the lower half of the bed once we clean it.”

Gerren nodded.

“Goodwife Mella, choose one assistant. Everyone else leaves.”

Mella pointed to the younger woman.

“My daughter, Palla.”

“Palla, your only responsibility after the baby is born will be keeping it warm. Prepare dry cloths near the fire. Not hot enough to burn. Warm.”

“What if it does not breathe?”

“I will tell you what to do.”

“You will be cutting Mara.”

“Then Maester Luwin will help the child under my direction.”

Luwin’s head lifted.

“I have delivered infants.”

“Have you made one breathe with your own breath?”

“No.”

“Today you may need to.”

The door opened. Catelyn Stark entered. A servant had found her before the guards could prevent it. Her eyes moved across the chamber, taking in the boiled water, bloodied sheets, frightened husband, exhausted mother, and Johnathan issuing orders.

“What is happening?”

Luwin answered.

“The child lies crosswise. It cannot be born.”

Catelyn looked toward Mara.

“Can nothing be done?”

Johnathan said, “I am going to operate.” Her gaze moved to him.

“How?”

“I will deliver the child through the abdomen.”

Catelyn’s face lost color.

“You intend to cut open a living woman.”

“Yes.”

“And she survives this in your world?”

“Usually, with resources I do not have here.”

“Then why attempt it?”

“Because without it they are both dying.”

Catelyn approached Mara’s bedside.

“Did she consent?”

“Yes.”

Catelyn looked at Mara rather than accepting his word. Mara whispered, “I told him to do it.” Lady Stark removed her cloak.

“What do you need from me?”

Johnathan had not expected the question.

“Authority.”

“You have it.”

“Keep unnecessary people outside. Have the kitchens send more boiling water. Find someone who can maintain the fire without entering the clean area. I need additional candles and two oil lamps.”

Catelyn nodded toward the guard.

“You heard him.”

The man left. Johnathan continued.

“When Mara wakes, she will need women she trusts. She may wake frightened and in severe pain.”

“I will remain.”

Gerren looked toward Lady Stark.

“My lady, you need not.”

“She is of Winterfell.”

The answer ended the matter. For the next half hour, the birthing chamber became something Westeros had never built. Not a true operating theater. Johnathan could not create tiled walls, sterile gowns, filtered air, electric suction, or machines that watched every breath and heartbeat. He could create order. The room was cleared of unnecessary furniture. The floor near the bed was scrubbed.

Fresh linen covered the mattress. The instruments boiled. The knives and forceps were transferred with clean metal tongs onto a boiled cloth. Johnathan made Mella and Palla wash their hands and forearms. He made Luwin scrub beneath every fingernail. He washed himself twice.

“Again?” Luwin asked.

“I touched the door.”

“I opened it.”

“And then you touched the medical case.”

Luwin returned to the basin. Johnathan poured distilled spirits over the skin of Mara’s lower abdomen after washing it with soap and boiled water. She shivered.

“It is cold.”

“I am sorry.”

“Do not be sorry. Be right.”

Johnathan looked at her.

“I will do my best.”

Luwin measured the sleeping draught.

“It is enough to render a large man senseless.”

“She is exhausted. Use less.”

“Too little and she wakes beneath the knife.”

“Too much and she stops breathing. Begin with half. We can add more.”

Mara swallowed the dreamwine mixed with a measured amount of milk of the poppy and the stronger sleeping preparation. Gerren supported her head. Catelyn held the cup. Johnathan waited. Mara’s speech became slow. Her eyelids lowered. Her breathing remained regular.

“Count every breath,” Johnathan told Luwin.

“For how long?”

“Until she is awake and speaking.”

“That may be hours.”

“Yes.”

Luwin knelt near her head. Mara opened her eyes one final time.

“My baby.”

Johnathan stood beside the bed.

“We are beginning.”

“Do not let it die.”

“I will not stop trying.”

Her eyes closed. Johnathan checked her response to pressure and then to a careful pinch. She moved faintly but did not wake. Not perfect anesthesia. Not even close. It was what they possessed. Johnathan positioned her slightly on her left side with folded cloth beneath one hip.

Luwin noticed.

“Why tilt her?”

“The weight of the womb can press upon the great vessels in her back. This may improve blood returning to the heart.”

Luwin looked as though he wanted to ask how anyone had discovered such a thing. There was no time. Johnathan picked up the knife. His hand did not tremble. That frightened him. It also saved time. He made a vertical incision low upon the abdomen.

Mara’s body tightened. Her breathing changed. Luwin looked toward him.

“She feels it.”

“Give a little more draught. Not all.”

Gerren turned away. Catelyn did not. Johnathan worked through the layers carefully. Skin. Fat. The strong covering over the abdominal muscles. He separated the muscles rather than cutting through them and opened the deeper lining with the smallest safe incision, using his fingers to protect what lay beneath. Luwin watched from Mara’s head. He could see only part of the operation, but it was enough to drain the last skepticism from his face. Johnathan placed boiled cloths around the opening. The enlarged womb filled the space beneath.

“Heart?” Johnathan asked. Luwin checked Mara’s neck.

“Fast.”

“Breathing?”

“Regular.”

“Good.”

Johnathan found the lower portion of the uterus. The child remained sideways. He made a small horizontal opening and extended it carefully with his fingers. Fluid escaped across the cloths. Blood followed. Goodwife Mella gasped.

“Cloths,” Johnathan said. Palla handed them over.

“Count every cloth placed near the wound.”

“Why?”

“So none remain inside her.”

Mella stared. Then she began counting.

“One.”

Johnathan reached through the uterine opening. He felt the child’s back. The head remained to Mara’s left. He followed the body until he found one leg, then the other. The uterus tightened around his arm. He waited only long enough for the contraction to ease.

“I have the feet.”

“You are pulling it backward?” Mella asked.

“The baby is sideways. I must bring the lower body through first.”

Johnathan drew the legs toward the opening. The hips followed. Then the abdomen. He rotated the shoulders carefully and freed one arm, then the other. The head remained trapped for a terrible second. Johnathan adjusted the angle, supported the neck, and lifted. The child came free.

A boy. Grey. Limp. Silent. Luwin looked at him.

“The child is dead.”

“No.”

Johnathan felt the cord. A weak pulse remained.

“He has a heartbeat.”

He tied and divided the cord.

“Palla, dry him. Remove the wet cloth immediately. Mella, clear only what you can see from the mouth. Do not push anything deeper.”

The women moved. Johnathan returned both hands to Mara. He could not abandon the open uterus.

“Luwin, go to the child.”

The maester hesitated.

“Her breathing remains steady. Go.”

Luwin moved to the small table near the fire. Palla rubbed the child's back with warm cloth. The boy remained silent.

"Position his head so the neck is straight," Johnathan said. "Not bent forward. Not forced backward."

Luwin obeyed.

"Is the heart beating?"

"Yes, but slowly."

"Seal your mouth over his mouth and nose. Give one small breath. Only enough to make the chest rise."

Luwin stared.

"With my mouth?"

"Yes."

"Could I force sickness into him?"

"Not breathing will kill him first. Give the breath."

Luwin bent over the infant. The tiny chest rose.

"Again," Johnathan said. "Gentle breaths. Watch the chest. Do not fill him like a wineskin."

Luwin breathed for the child. Palla continued rubbing and replacing wet cloth with warm dry linen. Johnathan removed the placenta from Mara's womb. The uterus felt soft beneath his hand. Too soft. Blood flowed heavily from the open incision.

"Mella, more cloth."

"Five."

"Keep counting."

Johnathan massaged the uterus firmly. It failed to contract. He removed clots from inside and compressed the uterine body between both hands. Blood continued.

"How much is she losing?" Catelyn asked.

"Too much."

Gerren made a sound near the wall. Johnathan did not look at him.

"Luwin, child?"

"Heart faster. No breath of his own."

"Continue."

Johnathan compressed the uterus.

“Come on.”

Mella looked at him.

“Who are you speaking to?”

“The muscle.”

The womb remained soft. Johnathan pressed one hand internally and the other outside, compressing the uterine walls together. The bleeding began to slow.

“Hold this pressure,” he told Mella. She placed her hands where he directed.

“Harder.”

“I will hurt her.”

“Pressure will not kill her. Bleeding will.”

Mella pressed. Johnathan began closing the uterine incision with gut thread. He used deep, careful stitches, taking enough tissue to control bleeding without entering too far into the cavity. Luwin continued breathing into the child. Then the infant moved. A small twitch. Luwin lifted his head.

“He moved.”

“Keep breathing.”

The child coughed. A thin sound followed. Then another. Palla rubbed his back. The baby opened his mouth and released a weak, angry cry. Gerren covered his face with both hands. Catelyn closed her eyes for one breath.

Luwin stared at the infant as though he had watched a stone begin speaking.

“Keep him warm,” Johnathan said. “If he stops breathing, begin again.”

The maester recovered.

“He is breathing.”

“Count it.”

Luwin placed two fingers against the cord stump.

“The heart is stronger.”

“Good.”

Johnathan finished the first layer of uterine closure and added a second reinforcing layer. The muscle beneath his fingers had

begun to firm. The bleeding slowed from a dangerous flow to a manageable seep.

“Mella, release pressure slowly.”

She did. The uterus remained contracted. Johnathan examined every portion he could see. No uncontrolled vessel. No widening tear. No retained piece of placenta.

“Count the cloths.”

“Eight.”

“How many removed?”

Mella counted them aloud. All eight came out.

“Needles?”

“Two used,” Palla said. “Both here.”

“Instruments?”

Luwin named each one. Nothing had been lost. Johnathan cleaned the area with warm boiled water. He closed the deeper abdominal lining and the strong layer over the muscles. He took larger, carefully spaced stitches through the fascia because that layer would carry most of the strain. Luwin returned to Mara’s head.

“Her pulse remains fast.”

“Quality?”

“Strong enough.”

“Breathing?”

“Slow but regular.”

“Color?”

“Pale.”

“She lost blood. Keep her warm.”

Johnathan closed the skin last. He left space for drainage rather than sealing every portion tightly. There were no antibiotics. If infection developed beneath a perfectly closed wound, it could kill her before anyone understood what was happening. When the final dressing was tied in place, Johnathan set down the needle. His hands were covered in blood. The room had gone almost silent.

The baby cried near the fire. Mara breathed upon the bed. Both sounds seemed impossible. Johnathan looked at Luwin.

“How long?”

The maester looked toward the sandglass and the marked candle beside it.

“Less than an hour from the first cut.”

Johnathan had no idea whether that was good. It was finished. For now. He washed the blood from his arms. It came away in red streams. Gerren approached the table where Palla held the child.

“May I?”

“Sit first,” Johnathan said.

“I can stand.”

“You are about to faint.”

“I am not.”

His knees weakened. Catelyn caught his shoulder and guided him toward a stool. Johnathan looked toward Palla.

“Place the baby against his father’s bare chest beneath the cloak. Skin against skin. Keep the head turned so the mouth and nose remain clear.”

Palla opened Gerren’s shirt and placed the wrapped child against him. The baby’s crying softened. Gerren looked down at his son.

“He is alive.”

“Yes.”

“My wife?”

“Alive.”

“Will she remain so?”

Johnathan looked toward Mara.

“I do not know.”

The happiness in Gerren’s face faltered. Johnathan continued.

“She survived the operation. The bleeding is controlled. Her breathing and pulse are acceptable. Those are good signs.”

“What can still happen?”

“Bleeding can return. Her wound can become infected. The womb can become infected. The sleeping medicine can slow her breathing. Her bowels may stop moving. She may develop fever, weakness, or a clot.”

Gerren stared at him.

“You said you saved her.”

“I saved her from the immediate danger. Medicine does not allow me to promise the next week.”

Luwin looked toward him. Johnathan’s honesty no longer sounded like uncertainty to the maester. It sounded like discipline. Catelyn moved beside Mara.

“What must be done?”

“Someone watches her constantly until she wakes.”

“I will arrange it.”

“Count her breaths. Check her pulse. Look for fresh bleeding beneath the blankets. Keep her warm, but not covered so heavily that you miss a fever.”

Luwin nodded.

“No solid food until she is fully awake. Then small amounts of water, followed by broth if she keeps it down.”

“And the child?” Mella asked.

“Warmth. Breathing. Feeding as soon as Mara is awake enough to hold him safely.”

“Goat’s milk until then?”

“Not unless necessary. The first milk from his mother is better.”

Mella frowned.

“The yellow milk?”

“Yes.”

“Some women throw it away.”

“Do not.”

Johnathan’s tone ended the discussion.

“It contains what the newborn needs and helps protect against sickness.”

Luwin absorbed that. Johnathan continued.

“When Mara wakes, place the baby against her chest and help him feed. Suckling may also encourage the womb to remain contracted.”

Another fact Luwin had not known. Another line added to an invisible list. Catelyn touched Mara’s forehead.

“She is cold.”

“Blood loss.”

“Can you replace the blood?”

Johnathan looked toward her.

“Not safely.”

“In your world?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“Through a vein, using blood from a compatible donor.”

Catelyn looked at him.

“Compatible.”

“Not every person’s blood can be given to every other person. The wrong blood can kill.”

“How do you know which is right?”

“With tests we cannot perform here.”

Luwin said, “Then we do nothing.”

“We control bleeding, keep her warm, provide fluid when she can swallow, and allow her body to replace what was lost.”

Johnathan looked toward Gerren.

“She will need meat, beans, greens, and whatever foods here contain the most iron.”

Luwin frowned.

“Iron is a metal.”

“It is also required in the blood.”

“You claim people contain iron.”

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“Only a small amount.”

Luwin looked toward his chain, as though reconsidering every iron link upon it. Johnathan almost smiled. He was too

tired emotionally, if not physically. Mara stirred. Her face tightened. Luwin moved to her side.

“She is waking.”

Johnathan checked her breathing.

“Mara?”

Her eyes opened slightly. Pain reached her before understanding did. She moaned. Johnathan leaned close enough for her to see him.

“The operation is finished.”

“My baby?”

The infant cried from beneath Gerren’s cloak. Mara’s face crumpled.

“Alive?”

“Alive.”

“And me?”

“You are alive too.”

She looked down, but the blankets concealed the dressing.

“It hurts.”

“I know.”

“Did you cut me?”

“Yes.”

“Did it work?”

Johnathan glanced toward the child.

“Yes.”

Mara began crying. Gerren brought the baby closer. Johnathan and Mella helped position the infant against her chest without placing weight upon the incision. The baby rooted weakly. Mella guided him. After several attempts, he latched. Mara’s hand settled against the back of his head.

The room became quiet again. This silence was different. Luwin stood beside Johnathan. The maester’s hands shook. Only slightly. Johnathan saw.

“You kept him breathing.”

Luwin looked toward the child.

“I breathed into a dead boy.”

“He was not dead.”

“He looked dead.”

“Looking dead and being dead are different conditions.”

Luwin turned toward him.

“I watched you cut through a living woman’s belly.”

Johnathan lowered his voice.

“Yes.”

“You opened the womb without cutting the child. You removed him backward because of his position. You controlled bleeding I believed impossible to stop. You closed the womb before closing the body.”

“Yes.”

“You counted cloth, instruments, needles, breaths, heartbeats, and every measure of the sleeping draught.”

“Yes.”

“And you speak as though this is ordinary.”

“It is not ordinary. It is major surgery.”

“But it is known.”

“In my world, yes.”

“How many maesters would be required to equal the healers of your world?”

“That is not how it works.”

“How does it work?”

“Thousands of years of people studying, failing, recording those failures, testing ideas, building instruments, discovering microbes, developing anesthesia, learning blood types, creating antibiotics, and training specialists.”

“You did not discover these things.”

“No.”

“You inherited them.”

“Yes.”

Luwin looked toward Mara and her child.

“Then your knowledge is not merely greater than mine.”

Johnathan said nothing.

“It stands at the far end of a road my order has barely begun to walk.”

“Your order preserves knowledge. That matters.”

“We would have written them off as dead.”

“You recognized the obstruction.”

“And then I reached the end of what I knew.”

“That does not make you ignorant.”

Luwin looked at the bloody water.

“It makes the distance visible.”

Johnathan understood. The maester was not humiliated because another man had known more. He was shaken because the boundaries of medicine had moved before his eyes. Yesterday, cutting into a living mother to retrieve her child had meant killing one life in a desperate effort to save another. Today, Mara held her son. Luwin looked at Johnathan again.

“How far ahead is your world?”

“Technologically?”

“In healing.”

Johnathan thought about the answer.

“Perhaps hundreds of years in some areas. More than a thousand in others.”

Luwin’s face became still.

“A thousand years.”

“At least.”

The maester looked toward the mother.

“Then the Citadel is not the summit.”

“No institution ever is.”

“What else do we not know?”

Johnathan looked at his clean hands.

“Almost everything.”

Luwin absorbed the words without offense. For the first time since Johnathan’s arrival, the maester did not look at him as a puzzle, threat, patient, liar, or impossible creature. He looked at him as a physician. Lady Catelyn watched them both.

“You saved two lives today.”

Johnathan looked toward Mara.

“They are not safe yet.”

“But they are alive.”

“Yes.”

Catelyn’s gaze remained upon him.

“Then we will keep them that way.”

* * *

Two hours later, Mara remained awake. Her pulse was still fast but had not weakened. The bleeding remained light. Her son had fed twice and slept against her chest beneath a warm cloth. Goodwife Mella had gone from doubting every instruction to writing each one down through Luwin because she could not read or write herself. Luwin prepared a monitoring sheet.

At Johnathan’s direction, he created columns for time, pulse, breathing, bleeding, temperature, drinking, passing water, pain, and the infant’s feeding.

“You make a record of everything,” Luwin said.

“Memory becomes unreliable when people are frightened and tired.”

“The women will need someone literate.”

“Use marks. One line for normal, two for concern, a cross for immediate help. Teach them.”

Luwin nodded and altered the sheet. Johnathan inspected the dressing one final time. Dry. No fresh blood. Mara watched him.

“Will I bear another child?”

The question stopped him. Luwin looked toward Johnathan. He could have offered comfort. He chose accuracy.

“You may.”

Mara waited.

“But?”

“The scar upon the womb may tear during a future labor. The danger will be greater.”

“Can you do this again?”

“If I am here and we prepare carefully.”

“And if you are not?”

Johnathan looked toward the infant.

“Then you must tell every healer and midwife that you have a scar upon your womb. A future baby should not be allowed to labor too long.”

Luwin said, “I will place it in Winterfell’s records.” Mara looked troubled.

“My private matters?”

“Only what another healer must know to keep you alive,” Johnathan said. “Not the details of your pain. Not anything unnecessary.”

She nodded.

“Then write it.”

Johnathan stood.

“Rest.”

“You tell everyone that.”

“Few people obey.”

Mara looked toward her baby.

“I will.”

Catelyn remained near the door. When Johnathan approached, she spoke quietly.

“You required her consent.”

“Yes.”

“Not her husband’s.”

“She was conscious and capable of deciding.”

“In Westeros, a husband may speak for his wife.”

“Not while she can speak for herself.”

Catelyn studied him.

“You would have refused if Gerren said no?”

“Yes.”

“And operated if Mara said yes?”

“Yes.”

“You say that before Lady Stark in her own castle.”

Johnathan felt the guards behind him become more attentive. He did not retreat.

"I say it as her doctor."

For several breaths, Catelyn gave him nothing. Then she looked toward Mara.

"I believe she would thank you for that answer."

Catelyn left the chamber. Johnathan looked at Luwin.

"Was that almost approval?"

"Do not become reckless."

"Too late."

* * *

Johnathan and Luwin reached Noll's chamber near the stables shortly after midday. The boy lay upon a narrow bed with his injured leg raised upon folded blankets. His mother sat beside him mending a torn shirt. Hullen stood near the hearth, looking as though he had personally ordered the wound to heal and remained offended by its slow obedience. Noll saw the bloodstains that remained upon the edge of Johnathan's sleeve.

"Did someone die?"

"No."

Luwin placed the medical case beside the bed.

"Two people nearly did."

Noll's eyes widened.

"What happened?"

"A child was born," Johnathan said.

"That happens every day."

"Not like this one."

Luwin gave him a warning glance. Johnathan understood. Mara's operation was not yet a story for the entire castle.

"Today we are discussing your leg."

Noll fell back against the pillow.

"My leg is boring."

"That is what we want."

Johnathan washed his hands. Hullen watched.

"You have washed enough today to remove your skin."

"My skin appears committed to remaining."

Noll's mother looked toward Luwin.

"Is the woman alive?"

"Yes," the maester said.

"The child?"

"Alive."

Hullen crossed his arms.

"What did he do?"

Luwin looked at Johnathan. Then back toward Hullen.

"Something the Citadel cannot presently teach."

That ended the questions. Johnathan removed Noll's dressing. The cloth beneath remained mostly clean. A small amount of pale drainage marked the inner layer, but there was no foul odor, spreading redness, black tissue, or heavy swelling. The wound was beginning to close from the deeper tissue outward.

"No corruption," Luwin said.

"Not at present."

Noll looked between them.

"Can I walk tomorrow?"

"No," Johnathan and Luwin answered together. The boy scowled.

"The king is coming."

"So I have heard."

"I want to see him."

Hullen shook his head.

"You will remain in that bed."

"I can be carried."

"You can complain from here."

Johnathan checked the splint and examined the warmth, color, sensation, and movement in Noll's foot. Everything remained satisfactory.

"Could he be carried to the covered gallery above the stable yard?" Johnathan asked. Hullen looked at him.

"Why encourage this?"

"Because a child who cooperates with treatment deserves something beyond another day staring at the ceiling."

Luwin considered it.

“If he remains without fever and the wound looks the same tomorrow, two men may carry the entire bed to the gallery before the king arrives.”

Noll sat up.

“The whole bed?”

“No standing,” Johnathan said. “No walking. No heroic escape down the stairs.”

“I would not.”

Every adult in the room looked at him. Noll sighed.

“I might.”

“That is why the bed goes with you.”

Johnathan cleaned the wound, replaced the light packing, and applied a fresh dressing. Luwin watched his technique.

“You use less cloth now.”

“The wound is producing less fluid.”

“You expect it to close without stitching.”

“It is already doing so. Closing the surface too early could trap infection beneath it.”

Hullen had heard the explanation before, but he still looked doubtful.

“A scar will remain.”

Johnathan secured the bandage.

“A scar means he survived long enough to make one.”

Noll looked down at his leg.

“Will it be large?”

“Probably.”

“Will it look impressive?”

“If you tell the story correctly.”

The boy smiled. That was when the royal outrider entered. He did not knock. He was a broad young knight with a red cloak thrown over one shoulder, polished boots, and the irritated expression of a man who had expected the North to arrange itself around him. A strip of linen had been wrapped around his left

hand. Blood had soaked through near the thumb. Two Winterfell guards stood behind him.

The knight looked at Luwin first.

“Are you the maester?”

“I am.”

His gaze moved to Johnathan.

“And this is the foreign doctor?”

“Doctor Johnathan Harrow.”

The knight studied Johnathan’s pale face.

“You look worse than my hand.”

Johnathan rose.

“That is a common first impression.”

The knight looked toward Noll.

“Is this the boy kicked by the horse?”

“Yes,” Luwin said.

“I heard the foreigner saved his leg.”

“Several people treated him.”

Johnathan pointed toward a stool.

“Sit.”

The knight’s eyebrows rose. No one spoke to knights in that tone unless they possessed a title, a sword, or very little concern for their continued health. Johnathan possessed none of those things. He was simply accustomed to injured people ignoring instructions. The knight sat. Johnathan washed his hands again. The man watched him.

“You already washed.”

“I touched another wound.”

“That boy has no plague.”

“I am protecting him from you as much as I am protecting you from him.”

The knight looked toward Luwin.

“Does he always speak this way?”

“Often.”

“That must become tiresome.”

“It has.”

Johnathan removed the bloodied wrapping. A jagged cut crossed the web of skin between the thumb and forefinger. It was deep enough to require closing but had missed the major vessels. Johnathan examined the hand.

“Move your thumb.”

The knight obeyed.

“Now touch the tip of your thumb to each finger.”

He did.

“Spread the fingers.”

They moved normally.

“Close them against my hand.”

The grip remained strong.

“Can you feel this?”

Johnathan touched both sides of the wound and each fingertip.

“Yes.”

“What cut you?”

“A buckle.”

“Clean buckle?”

“It was attached to a saddle.”

“That means no.”

The knight frowned.

“Will I lose the hand?”

“No.”

“You sound certain.”

“I am certain enough to say that unless you do something creative after leaving.”

The knight gave a reluctant laugh. Johnathan cleaned the wound while Luwin prepared needle and thread. The man’s jaw tightened when the water touched torn flesh.

“You are not using wine?” he asked.

“Clean boiled water first.”

“Wine kills corruption.”

“Some strong spirits may reduce it. Pouring ordinary wine into a deep wound also harms healthy tissue.”

The knight looked toward Luwin again. The maester said, "His cleaning has served the stable boy well." That appeared sufficient. Johnathan placed three stitches. The knight watched him work.

"You have done this before."

"Many times."

"Where?"

Johnathan tied the final knot.

"In Ohio."

"Where is that?"

"Beyond the eastern maps."

"Near Yi Ti?"

"No."

"Asshai?"

"Not particularly."

"Farther?"

"Yes."

The knight waited for more. Johnathan gave him none. Luwin noticed. Approval appeared briefly in the maester's eyes. Johnathan covered the wound with clean cloth.

"Keep this dry. Return if the hand becomes red, hot, swollen, increasingly painful, or begins producing foul fluid."

"Foul fluid."

"You will recognize it."

The knight stood and flexed the bandaged hand.

"What do I owe you?"

"Nothing."

He looked suspicious.

"Every man wants something."

"Then avoid tearing the stitches. That will save me time."

The knight laughed again.

"My name is Ser Wendel Manderly."

Johnathan paused. Manderly. Not one of Robert's southron men, then. A northern knight attached to the escort or riding

ahead to help receive the king. Johnathan had failed to notice the small silver merman clasp beneath the red traveling cloak.

“Doctor Johnathan Harrow.”

“I heard.”

Ser Wendel looked toward Noll.

“The king’s party is half a day south. They will arrive tomorrow unless Robert finds another boar worth chasing.”

Johnathan’s hands stopped for less than a second. Robert. A boar. Not yet. Ser Wendel continued.

“Prepare for noise. His Grace believes a quiet entrance is an insult to friendship.”

“I will keep that in mind.”

The knight nodded to Luwin and left. Hullen watched him go.

“Royal men enter without knocking.”

“Then perhaps the king’s visit will teach us the medical value of locked doors,” Johnathan said. Luwin closed the case.

“The king may object.”

“The king is welcome to make an appointment.”

* * *

Robb found them outside the stable. Grey Wind walked at his side without a leash. The direwolf had grown quickly. His shoulders were still those of a young animal, but his legs had lengthened and his paws promised something far larger. People moved out of his way. Grey Wind noticed Johnathan before Robb spoke. The wolf stopped and stared.

Johnathan remained still. He heard no thoughts or secret voices. Only the soft sound of the wolf breathing and the scrape of claws upon frozen stone. That was enough. Grey Wind stepped closer and sniffed Johnathan’s boots. Johnathan looked toward Robb.

“Is this an examination?”

“He does what he wishes.”

“Comforting.”

Grey Wind sniffed the medical case, then returned to Robb's side. Robb watched Johnathan.

"You did not flinch."

"I have met larger dogs."

"He is not a dog."

"I know."

"You called Summer a dog yesterday."

"I was attempting humor."

"That does not improve it."

Johnathan looked at Luwin.

"The northern kindness continues."

Luwin took the medical case from him.

"Why are you here, Robb?"

"There is trouble near the practice yard."

Johnathan's attention sharpened.

"Bran?"

"Rickon."

Luwin exhaled.

"What has he done?"

"Nothing."

Johnathan waited. Robb corrected himself.

"Shaggydog has done something."

"That sounds more believable."

"He chewed through a saddle strap belonging to one of the outriders."

"Was the saddle occupied?"

"No."

"Was the horse attached?"

"No."

"Was anyone harmed?"

"No."

Johnathan looked at Luwin.

"I am struggling to identify the medical emergency."

"Rickon insists Shaggydog was defending Winterfell," Robb said.

“From the saddle?”

“Apparently.”

“And what does Rickon expect from me?”

“He says doctors understand why animals bite.”

Johnathan stared at him.

“Who told him that?”

“Bran.”

“Of course.”

Robb began walking. Johnathan and Luwin followed. After several steps, Robb spoke again.

“Jon avoided breakfast.”

Johnathan looked toward him.

“Did he say why?”

“No.”

“Then I should not guess.”

Robb glanced at him.

“That is new.”

“I am attempting growth.”

“He went to the godswood before dawn. Father joined him.”

Johnathan kept his face still. Ned had promised Jon nothing except that the truth had a reason for remaining hidden. Perhaps he had said more. Perhaps he had only repeated the refusal. Neither possibility belonged to Johnathan.

“Give him room,” he said.

“He is my brother.”

“Yes.”

“I should help him.”

“Helping does not always mean forcing someone to speak.”

Robb looked ahead.

“You know what troubles him.”

“I know part of it.”

“And you will not tell me.”

“No.”

Robb’s expression tightened, but not with the same anger as before. Chapter Eight had changed something between them.

Robb did not trust Johnathan fully. He had, however, begun to believe that some refusals might be intended as protection rather than control.

“What should I tell him?” Robb asked.

“That you are available when he wants you.”

“That sounds too simple.”

“Most useful things do.”

Luwin looked at Johnathan.

“That principle has not governed your speech until now.”

“I said I was attempting growth.”

They crossed beneath an archway. Ahead, the practice yard had become a gathering place. Catelyn stood beneath the covered walkway with Sansa beside her. Two women worked around Sansa’s cloak, adjusting the fall of the fur and trying to keep her still. Arya stood several paces away holding what had once been part of a broom. She had wrapped one end with cloth to create a handle. The result remained a stick. Arya considered it a sword.

Bran sat upon a low wall with Summer at his feet. Rickon crouched beside Shaggydog, gripping the remains of a leather strap in one hand. Jon stood near the edge of the yard with Ghost. The white direwolf watched Johnathan approach. Ghost’s red eyes made every ordinary stare feel supernatural. Johnathan reminded himself that the wolf was not reading his mind. Probably.

Rickon jumped to his feet.

“Doctor!”

Johnathan stopped.

“That is me.”

“Shaggydog killed a horse thing.”

Bran corrected him.

“Saddle strap.”

Rickon scowled.

“Horse thing.”

Johnathan crouched near him.

“May I see the evidence?”

Rickon handed him the leather. The strap had torn near an old crack. Teeth marks covered the softer portion near the end. Johnathan bent it. The leather split further with very little pressure.

“This was already damaged.”

Rickon looked pleased.

“So he did not do it.”

“He finished it.”

Rickon’s pleasure vanished.

“Why?”

Johnathan looked at Shaggydog. The black direwolf pup stood overlarge for his age, with bright green eyes and a permanent expression of offended suspicion. Johnathan did not need telepathy to make a reasonable guess.

“The leather smells of horse, sweat, salt, and animal fat used to soften it. It was hanging within reach. He is young, curious, and equipped with teeth.”

Rickon looked down at the wolf.

“He thought it was food?”

“Possibly. Or a toy.”

“He was defending the yard.”

“From equipment?”

Rickon folded his arms.

“Maybe.”

Johnathan held the ruined strap toward him.

“Can Shaggydog understand commands yet?”

“Yes.”

“Which commands?”

Rickon opened his mouth. Nothing came out. Robb looked away to hide amusement. Johnathan continued.

“Grey Wind knows his name. Ghost follows Jon. Summer comes when Bran calls, most of the time.”

“Summer always comes,” Bran said. Summer lifted his head but remained where he was. Bran frowned. Johnathan pointed toward Shaggydog.

“Teach him one word. Use the same word every time he takes something he should not.”

“What word?”

“Leave.”

Rickon looked disappointed.

“That is boring.”

“Boring words save saddles.”

Arya approached with her practice stick.

“Teach him bite.”

Catelyn’s voice crossed the yard.

“Arya.”

Arya stopped.

“I did not say who.”

“You did not need to.”

Johnathan returned the strap to Rickon.

“Give Shaggydog something he is permitted to chew. A thick piece of rawhide, perhaps. When he takes the correct object, reward him. When he takes a saddle, say leave and trade it for the proper thing.”

Rickon looked suspicious.

“Trade?”

“If you only pull the object away, he may turn it into a game. If you strike him, he may learn to fear your hands instead of understanding the command.”

Robb studied him.

“You know wolves?”

“No.”

“You spoke confidently.”

“I know young animals and young children both respond badly when adults replace teaching with shouting.”

Catelyn looked toward Rickon. Rickon was three years old, holding a ruined saddle strap and standing beside a black direwolf that would one day become large enough to kill a man. The comparison was difficult to ignore. Johnathan rose.

“Ask Hullen for a suitable piece of hide. Not something small enough to swallow.”

Rickon grabbed Shaggydog’s fur.

“Come.”

The direwolf followed him toward the stable. Rickon turned back.

“Leave.”

Shaggydog continued walking. Rickon nodded, satisfied.

“He knows it.”

“He was already leaving,” Arya said. Rickon ignored her. Bran slid down from the wall.

“You owe me a story.”

Johnathan looked toward him.

“I was hoping the medical treatment of a saddle might count.”

“It does not.”

“I suspected that.”

“You promised Ser Duncan the Tall.”

Johnathan glanced at Catelyn. Lady Stark’s expression carried a clear warning. No falling boys. No broken towers. No hidden princes whose stories looked too much like Jon Snow. Johnathan looked toward Bran again.

“A promise is a promise.”

Bran smiled. Sansa stepped away from the women adjusting her cloak.

“Must it be told in the yard?”

Arya looked at her.

“You can leave.”

“I did not say I wanted to.”

“You sounded like it.”

Sansa’s chin lifted.

“I only meant that the wind will ruin my hair.”

Johnathan looked toward the covered walkway.

“There is room beneath the roof.”

Bran hurried there first. Summer followed. Rickon returned moments later dragging a thick strip of hide while Shaggydog

attempted to seize the other end. Jon remained near the yard's edge. Robb joined Bran. Arya sat upon an overturned bucket. Sansa settled beside Catelyn, careful to keep the hem of her dress away from the wet stone.

Luwin remained standing. Johnathan found a low stool. He looked at the children.

"One story."

Bran nodded.

"A full one."

"Reasonably full."

"No turnips."

"There are no turnips in this account."

Rickon raised one hand.

"Biting?"

"Probably."

Arya smiled. Sansa sighed. Johnathan folded his hands.

"There was once a hedge knight so tall that height became half his name."

"Ser Duncan," Bran said.

"Ser Duncan the Tall. Dunk to the people who knew him before songs made him grander."

"Was he truly tall?" Rickon asked.

"Very."

"How tall?"

"Nearly seven feet, according to some accounts."

Bran looked impressed.

"Hodor is taller."

Johnathan paused.

"Hodor may be."

Bran seemed pleased that Winterfell possessed something larger than history.

"Dunk was not born in a castle," Johnathan continued. "He had no great house, no wealthy father, and no maester recording his childhood. He grew up in Flea Bottom, one of the poorest parts of King's Landing."

Sansa frowned.

“A knight from Flea Bottom?”

“Eventually.”

“Who knighted him?”

“An old hedge knight named Ser Arlan of Pennytree raised him as a squire. Whether Ser Arlan knighted Dunk before dying is uncertain.”

Robb looked toward Luwin.

“Would that make Duncan a false knight?”

The maester answered.

“If he was never knighted, yes.”

Johnathan nodded.

“But there are truths that records cannot recover. Dunk carried Ser Arlan’s sword, shield, armor, and memory. He also carried the lessons the old man taught him. Whatever words were or were not spoken beneath the final tree, Duncan spent the rest of his life attempting to become the knight he believed Ser Arlan expected.”

Jon’s attention sharpened.

“So he may have lied.”

“Yes.”

“And still became a great knight.”

“Yes.”

Jon looked away. Johnathan continued.

“After Ser Arlan died, Dunk traveled to a great tourney at Ashford. He intended to enter the lists, win a few matches, earn enough coin to eat, and begin his life as a true knight.”

“That sounds simple,” Bran said.

“It stopped being simple almost immediately.”

Arya leaned forward.

“What happened?”

“He met a bald stable boy with a sharp tongue who called himself Egg.”

Rickon touched his own hair.

“Why was he bald?”

“He shaved his head to hide the color.”

“What color?”

“Targaryen silver.”

Sansa’s eyes widened.

“He was a prince.”

“Aegon Targaryen, the fourth son of Prince Maekar. One day he would become King Aegon the Fifth. At Ashford, however, he was only Egg, a boy who wanted to see what the realm looked like when no one knew they were expected to bow.”

Bran looked toward Jon.

“A prince pretending not to be a prince.”

Jon remained still. Johnathan kept going before the thought could travel in a dangerous direction.

“Dunk did not know the truth at first. He accepted Egg as his squire because the boy was clever, stubborn, and difficult to remove.”

“That sounds like Bran,” Arya said.

“It does not,” Bran replied.

“It does,” Robb said. Bran glared at him.

“During the tourney,” Johnathan said, “Dunk met a puppeteer named Tanselle. She was tall, clever, and skilled at painting. One of her puppet shows told a story about a brave knight defeating a dragon.”

Rickon looked toward the sky.

“A real dragon?”

“A cloth dragon held above a puppet stage.”

“That is less good.”

“One of the Targaryen princes agreed.”

Johnathan’s tone changed.

“Prince Aerion was called Brightflame. He was handsome, proud, cruel, and convinced that being born a dragon placed him above ordinary men.”

Sansa shifted.

“He was still a prince.”

“Yes.”

“What did he do?”

“He saw the puppet dragon defeated and decided the show insulted his house. He destroyed the puppet and hurt Tanselle when she tried to protect it.”

Arya gripped her wooden practice sword.

“What did Dunk do?”

“He told the prince to stop.”

“Did he?”

“No.”

Arya smiled.

“So Dunk hit him.”

“He did more than hit him. He struck a prince of the blood, threw him into the mud, and protected Tanselle while every sensible person nearby remembered that striking a royal prince could end with a severed hand, a lost foot, or death.”

Bran’s eyes widened.

“Was Dunk frightened?”

“Terrified.”

“Then why did he do it?”

Johnathan looked at him.

“Because courage is not the absence of fear.”

Ned had once told Bran the same thing after Gared’s execution. Bran recognized it.

“My father says a man can only be brave when he is afraid.”

“Your father is correct.”

Catelyn’s expression softened slightly.

“What happened to Dunk?” Robb asked.

“He was arrested.”

Arya looked offended.

“Aerion hurt her.”

“Prince Aerion possessed royal blood. Tanselle was a puppeteer. Westerosi law and Westerosi power did not always stand in the same place.”

“That is wrong,” Bran said.

“Yes.”

Luwin studied Johnathan, perhaps surprised by the simplicity of the answer.

“Dunk demanded a trial,” Johnathan continued. “Because the accusation involved royal blood and more than one prince, the matter became a trial of seven.”

“Seven knights on each side,” Robb said.

“Yes.”

“Fourteen men fighting over one blow?” Sansa asked.

“Over whether Dunk’s act was criminal assault or the defense of an innocent woman.”

“He struck a prince,” Sansa said again. Arya turned toward her.

“The prince deserved it.”

“That does not mean anyone may strike him.”

“It should.”

Catelyn intervened.

“Let him finish.”

Johnathan waited until both girls settled.

“Dunk needed six knights willing to stand beside him. He was poor, unknown, and accused of attacking a prince. Men who had praised his courage earlier suddenly discovered urgent reasons to be elsewhere.”

Jon looked toward the yard.

“That sounds true.”

“It usually is.”

“Did anyone help him?” Bran asked.

“A few.”

Johnathan described the men who joined Dunk, keeping their names and histories brief enough that the story did not become a maester’s lecture. One came for friendship. One came from dislike of Aerion. Another came because a wrong remained wrong even when committed by a prince. Still, Dunk remained short one champion.

“The trial could not begin without seven,” Robb said.

“Correct.”

“What happened?”

“Prince Baelor Targaryen entered the field.”

Even Luwin’s expression changed.

“Baelor Breakspear,” the maester said. Johnathan nodded.

“The heir to the Iron Throne and Hand of the King.”

Sansa looked confused.

“He fought against his own family?”

“He fought for the law as he believed it should be. Baelor had listened to Dunk’s account. He had seen enough of Aerion to know cruelty was possible. When Dunk lacked a final champion, Baelor removed his helm and stood beside the hedge knight.”

Bran stared.

“The prince defended him.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because Baelor believed justice meant little if it protected only people important enough to demand it.”

No one spoke. Johnathan allowed the silence to remain. Then Arya asked the question everyone expected.

“Who won?”

“The fighting was brutal. Dunk faced Aerion and forced him to yield. The hedge knight survived. His name was cleared.”

Arya grinned. Rickon began striking the air with his strip of hide.

“Did he bite him?”

“No.”

“Bad story.”

“But the victory carried a price,” Johnathan said.

Catelyn’s attention sharpened. Bran noticed the change in his voice.

“What price?”

“Prince Baelor was injured during the trial. A blow from his brother Maekar damaged his head beneath the helm.”

Sansa’s hand moved to her mouth.

“He died?”

“Yes.”

Bran looked toward the ground.

“You said this was one of the better stories.”

“It is.”

“A good prince died.”

“Yes.”

“Then it is sad.”

“It is.”

Bran looked frustrated.

“Why tell it?”

Johnathan considered his answer. He could have softened it. He could have claimed the meaning was that Dunk became great or that Aerion was punished. Those things were true. They were not the center of it.

“Because doing the right thing does not promise a painless ending,” Johnathan said. “Dunk protected someone who could not protect herself. Baelor defended a man the realm considered unimportant. Neither man knew what the choice would cost.”

“Would Dunk have hit Aerion if he knew?” Robb asked. Johnathan looked at him.

“I don’t know.”

Robb waited. Johnathan continued.

“He may have spent the rest of his life asking himself that question. He may have wished he had found another way. He may have blamed himself for Baelor’s death.”

“Was it his fault?” Bran asked.

“Not alone. Aerion’s cruelty caused the confrontation. The laws of trial demanded fourteen men fight. Maekar’s blow killed his brother. Every person involved made a choice.”

“That is not an answer,” Bran said.

“No.”

“You say that often.”

“I am beginning to recognize questions that do not possess simple answers.”

Jon finally spoke.

“Did Dunk regret defending the puppeteer?”

Johnathan met his eyes.

“I do not think so.”

Jon nodded once. That seemed to matter to him. Sansa looked troubled.

“A knight should protect the weak.”

“Yes.”

“But he should obey princes.”

“When the two duties conflict, the choice reveals what sort of knight he truly is.”

Arya smiled at Sansa. Sansa did not return it. Robb looked toward Grey Wind.

“And Ser Duncan became Lord Commander of the Kingsguard.”

“Eventually. The uncertain hedge knight from Flea Bottom became one of the greatest knights of his age. Egg became king.”

“What happened to Aerion?” Arya asked. Johnathan hesitated.

“He later drank wildfire because he believed it would transform him into a dragon.”

Rickon stopped swinging the hide.

“Did it?”

“No.”

“What happened?”

“He died.”

Rickon considered that.

“That was stupid.”

“Extremely.”

Luwin closed his eyes. Catelyn looked at Johnathan.

“You could have ended before that.”

“I considered it.”

Bran looked up.

“Did Ser Duncan ever fight a real monster?”

Johnathan thought of Blackfyres, kings, rebellions, proud lords, and the fire at Summerhall.

“Mostly men.”

“People are not monsters.”

Johnathan remembered the previous day.

“Sometimes the difference depends upon their choices.”

Bran considered this. Then he looked toward the towers.

“I stayed down.”

“You did.”

“So tomorrow I receive another story.”

“Yes.”

“About a monster.”

“Reasonably defined.”

“No turnips.”

“No turnips.”

The bargain remained intact. That mattered more than Johnathan wanted to admit.

* * *

A raven landed upon the roof above them. It hopped along the edge, black feathers shining beneath the grey daylight. Johnathan saw it and stopped smiling. Another raven joined it.

Then a third. Bran followed his gaze.

“They are only ravens.”

“Yes.”

“You look afraid.”

“I am cautious around intelligent birds.”

Arya lifted her stick.

“Could you fight one?”

“I would prefer diplomacy.”

The first raven tilted its head.

“Corn,” it croaked. Rickon looked delighted.

“It talks.”

“It knows a word associated with food,” Luwin said. The raven called again.

“Corn.”

Johnathan watched it. He heard no voice behind the bird, no thought, and no ancient mind scraping against his own. It was a

raven asking for corn because ravens liked corn. That should have reassured him. It did not. He knew what Bloodraven had become in the old future. He knew Bran's path had once led north through dreams, roots, ravens, and the three-eyed crow.

Bran had not fallen. The boy had not spent weeks unconscious. He had not opened his eyes carrying the first wounds of that road. Yet Bloodraven still existed somewhere beyond the Wall. If Bran mattered to him, removing the fall might not remove the interest. Johnathan had no evidence that the birds above Winterfell were anything except hungry animals. That distinction mattered.

Catelyn noticed his expression.

"What is it?"

"Nothing certain."

Her face hardened.

"That phrase rarely comforts me."

"I know."

Luwin looked toward the children.

"Perhaps we should continue this elsewhere."

Johnathan nodded. A horn sounded from the outer wall. Everyone in the yard looked toward the gatehouse. The sound was not an alarm. One long call, answered by two shorter notes. Another group approaching. The Stark children remained where they were.

Bran stood beside Summer. He was on the ground. Johnathan felt no vision and received no supernatural warning. The yard did not blur. No future opened before him. He simply understood, with sudden force, that the scene he remembered could no longer happen in the same way. Bran would not climb the broken tower during the royal arrival.

The guards would not leave it unwatched. Jaime and Cersei could not enter unseen without risking discovery. The old sequence had been interrupted. That did not mean the danger had vanished. Jaime still loved Cersei. Cersei still protected the secret of her children. Robert still trusted them.

Ned still loved Robert. Littlefinger still waited in King's Landing. Jon Arryn was still dead. The board had changed. The players had not. Catelyn touched Bran's shoulder.

"Inside."

Bran looked toward the gate.

"But the riders."

"You will see enough riders tomorrow."

The tone allowed no negotiation. Arya opened her mouth, saw her mother's face, and chose silence. Sansa rose at once. Rickon seized Shaggydog's fur. Jon remained near Ghost. Catelyn looked toward him.

"You as well."

Jon nodded.

"Yes, my lady."

Johnathan saw the familiar wound cross his face. He looked away before Jon noticed. Robb guided Bran toward the Great Keep. Summer followed. Bran glanced back at Johnathan.

"The story counted."

"It counted."

"You still owe tomorrow."

"I know."

The children disappeared inside. The three ravens remained upon the roof.

"Corn," one called. Johnathan looked at Luwin.

"I need to speak with Ned."

* * *

Ser Rodrik arrived first. Ned entered the small council chamber moments later with Benjen beside him. Catelyn followed after ensuring the children had been taken to the family rooms. Luwin closed the door. Johnathan stood near the narrow table. Ser Rodrik placed several stones upon a rough map of Winterfell.

"The new riders carry final instructions from the king's steward. The royal party has made camp less than half a day south."

“Arrival?” Ned asked.

“After sunrise. They intend to approach together.”

“How many?”

“Near three hundred, counting knights, sworn swords, servants, squires, grooms, cooks, wagons, and royal officers.”

Ned looked toward the map.

“The main gates remain clear.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“The royal horses?”

“Hullen has divided the stable space. The overflow will remain outside the inner wall beneath guard.”

“The queen’s rooms?”

“Prepared.”

“The children?”

Catelyn answered.

“With me tonight. Tomorrow Robb and Jon will help keep Bran and Rickon near the wolves.”

Ser Rodrik touched the stone marking the broken tower.

“Four men remain within sight of the approaches. Two more watch from the First Keep. The assignments rotate so no pattern appears unusual.”

“Any royal man who asks?” Ned said.

“The masonry is unstable and repairs are underway.”

Johnathan nodded.

“A useful truth.”

Ser Rodrik looked at him.

“It is also a warning. You will not enter the tower either.”

“I have no desire to.”

“You entered walls before.”

“That was different.”

“How?”

Johnathan considered the question.

“I was much more foolish.”

Ser Rodrik’s whiskers moved.

“That does not reassure me.”

Ned looked toward the door.

“Continue the watches. Tell Jory I want the household guards sober through the night.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“No one confronts the queen or Ser Jaime.”

“No.”

“If Bran disappears from sight, notify me before searching publicly.”

Ser Rodrik nodded.

“We will find him quietly.”

He left. The door closed. The room became more private. Ser Rodrik knew Johnathan was unnatural and that Bran faced danger during the royal visit. He did not know why Jaime and Cersei were dangerous. He did not know the truth of the royal children. He did not know what Jon Snow’s birth might mean. Ned waited until the knight’s footsteps faded.

“Now tell me why the ravens frightened you.”

Johnathan appreciated the precision. He also wished the question were easier.

“They may mean nothing.”

Catelyn folded her arms.

“Then why are we here?”

“Because I promised to report dangers instead of deciding alone which ones mattered.”

Ned gave a small nod. That was not praise. It was recognition of improvement. Johnathan continued.

“I saw nothing. I heard no voice. No bird spoke inside my mind. The horn did not give me a vision. I need that understood first.”

Luwin watched him carefully. Ned said, “It is understood.”

“The ravens made me remember someone.”

“Who?” Benjen asked.

“Brynden Rivers.”

Benjen’s expression changed.

“Bloodraven.”

“Yes.”

Catelyn looked between them.

“The Targaryen bastard?”

“Son of Aegon the Unworthy,” Luwin said. “A legitimized Great Bastard, Hand of the King, and later a brother of the Night’s Watch.”

“Lord Commander,” Benjen added. “He disappeared during a ranging.”

“In the year two hundred and fifty-two,” Luwin said. Johnathan nodded.

“He did not die then.”

Silence followed. Ned’s gaze sharpened.

“You know this from the future you remember.”

“Yes.”

“Where is he?”

“Beyond the Wall. Beneath the earth, inside a cave bound through roots and old magic.”

Benjen pushed away from the wall.

“You are certain?”

“I am certain that was his place in the old future. I am not certain where he is at this exact moment, what he can see, or whether he knows anything about me.”

Catelyn’s face had gone pale.

“What does he want with Bran?”

“I do not know whether he wants anything with Bran yet.”

“You said Bran mattered to him.”

“In the old future, after Bran fell, dreams led him toward Bloodraven.”

Catelyn stepped closer.

“What dreams?”

“A crow with three eyes. Falling, flying, weirwoods, and a voice calling him north.”

“Bran has said nothing of such dreams.”

“That is good.”

“Or he has not told us.”

“That is possible.”

Ned looked toward Luwin.

“What do the histories say?”

The maester folded his hands.

“Stories claim the greenseers of the children could see through the carved eyes of weirwoods. Other accounts say they communicated with beasts and taught ravens to carry spoken words before the maesters reduced the art to messages tied upon legs.”

“Do you believe the accounts?” Catelyn asked.

“I believe ravens are clever. I believe the children possessed knowledge now lost. I do not know which tales preserve truth and which grew in the telling.”

Johnathan looked toward her.

“That is where I stand as well. Bloodraven may be able to see through ravens. He may require a weirwood. He may not be aware of Bran at all because the fall never happened.”

“Or he may seek another road,” Ned said.

“Yes.”

Catelyn’s fear hardened into anger.

“Then keep Bran away from the godswood.”

Ned shook his head.

“No.”

She turned toward him.

“Ned.”

“The godswood is the heart of Winterfell. We will not teach Bran to fear his own gods because of a danger we cannot prove.”

“My son matters more than a grove of trees.”

“Yes.”

Ned’s answer was immediate.

“That is why we will watch and learn before we act blindly.”

Catelyn looked toward Johnathan.

“What would you do?”

The old Johnathan might have answered too quickly. He might have described caves, Jojen Reed, Meera, Hodor, the Night

King from another version of the story, and every theory ever argued across the internet. Instead, he considered what they actually knew.

“Ask Bran about his dreams without frightening him. Write them down. Note whether he dreams of ravens, weirwoods, falling, flying, roots, or a red eye.”

“Bloodraven had one red eye,” Benjen said.

“Yes.”

“What else?”

“Do not leave Bran alone in the godswood after dark. Do not forbid him from entering during daylight. A sudden prohibition would make him curious and might tell any watcher that we are afraid.”

Ned nodded.

“That is reasonable.”

Catelyn did not like it. She accepted it because no better answer existed.

“You will speak with Bran?” she asked.

“With one of you present.”

“You will not tell him about Bloodraven.”

“No.”

“You will not question him as though he is ill.”

“I will ask about sleep the way a physician would.”

Luwin said, “I will be present.” Catelyn looked between them.

“Both of you.”

Johnathan nodded.

“Agreed.”

Benjen remained focused upon him.

“If Bloodraven survives, he is more than a hundred and twenty years old.”

“Yes.”

“What has he become?”

“I do not know how to answer without sounding impossible.”

Benjen looked at Johnathan’s corpse-pale face.

“We have passed impossible.”

“He is joined to the roots beneath the earth. He sees fragments of the past through weirwoods. Perhaps other things as well.”

“Can he command ravens?”

“Possibly.”

“Can he command men?”

“I do not know.”

Ned’s voice became firm.

“Then we do not treat possibility as certainty.”

Johnathan met his eyes.

“No.”

It was the correct answer. Ned recognized that too.

“What happened in the yard when the horn sounded?” Catelyn asked. Johnathan looked toward her.

“I realized I no longer know the sequence.”

“You already knew events were changing.”

“Yes. But until today, I still carried the old future like a map. Bran would climb. Jaime and Cersei would enter the tower. Bran would see them. Jaime would throw him from the window.”

Catelyn closed her eyes. Johnathan continued carefully.

“Tomorrow Bran will remain beside Robb, Jon, and Summer. The tower will be watched. Jaime and Cersei cannot follow the old path without exposing themselves.”

“That should be good,” Benjen said.

“It is.”

“But?”

“Their motives remain. Their secret remains. Jon Arryn’s death remains. Robert’s trust remains. Stopping one event does not make the people involved become different people.”

Ned looked toward the map.

“So the danger has no fixed place.”

“Not one I can remember.”

“Do you feel where it moves?”

“No.”

The answer surprised everyone except Johnathan. He continued.

"I am not developing a new prophecy. I do not feel fate bending. I am looking at incomplete information and recognizing that my memory no longer predicts the outcome."

Luwin studied him.

"That is a less dramatic explanation."

"It is also the honest one."

Ned nodded once.

"Keep using it."

Johnathan drew a slow breath.

"There is another matter."

Catelyn's expression tightened.

"Of course there is."

"Stannis."

Ned looked toward him.

"What of him?"

"In the future I remember, Jon Arryn did not investigate the royal children alone. Stannis worked with him."

Benjen frowned.

"Robert's brother."

"Yes."

"Why would Jon Arryn involve Stannis?"

"Because Stannis sits upon the small council, knows Robert, distrusts the Lannisters, and follows law even when everyone around him finds it inconvenient."

Ned's gaze sharpened.

"Where is he now?"

"Dragonstone."

"He is Lord of Dragonstone," Luwin said.

Johnathan nodded.

"He left King's Landing after Jon Arryn died. I believe he already suspects the truth or enough of it to fear remaining at court."

Catelyn looked toward Ned.

"Why did you not tell us this before?"

"I mentioned that Stannis might need warning. I did not explain how much he already knew because I was still throwing dangers into rooms faster than anyone could examine them."

"That has not stopped entirely," Benjen said.

"No."

Johnathan accepted the rebuke.

"It is improving."

Ned moved closer to the table.

"If Robert asks me to become Hand, you believe I should contact Stannis."

"Yes."

"Before answering?"

Johnathan considered it.

"Possibly. But a raven may be intercepted, and a careless message could warn Cersei that Jon Arryn's investigation survived."

"What would you write?" Catelyn asked.

"Nothing about incest. Nothing naming the children. Ask Stannis whether he worked with Jon Arryn before his death and whether he will meet Lord Stark privately."

Ned studied him.

"Why not send the message tonight?"

"Because Robert arrives tomorrow. You may learn more from him, his household, and his reaction to Jon Arryn's death. You may also decide that sending a raven from Winterfell while the queen's men fill the castle is too dangerous."

Ned looked toward Catelyn. She said, "It is." Johnathan continued.

"If you go south, Stannis is the lawful ally most likely to follow evidence wherever it leads."

"And if I refuse Robert?" Ned asked.

"Stannis remains useful. The truth in King's Landing will not disappear merely because you remain in Winterfell."

Ned studied the map.

"No letter tonight."

Johnathan nodded.

“Agreed.”

“You will not send one without my knowledge.”

“I will not.”

“You will not disappear through a wall and begin traveling toward Dragonstone.”

“That was not my plan.”

Ned looked at him. Johnathan corrected himself.

“It is not my plan now.”

Catelyn closed her eyes briefly. Benjen laughed once. It was the first full laugh Johnathan had heard from him. Ned did not join him.

“When Robert arrives,” Ned said, “I will listen. I will delay my answer. Afterward, we decide whether Stannis receives a message.”

Johnathan nodded.

“That is better than anything I was considering.”

“What were you considering?”

“An anonymous letter.”

Ned stared at him.

“Which is why your plan is better.”

Luwin rubbed his forehead.

“Progress remains exhausting.”

Benjen returned his attention to Johnathan.

“The king arrives tomorrow. You have delayed our discussion of the dead long enough.”

Ned looked toward him.

“Ben.”

“The Wall does not stop weakening because Robert wishes to drink in Winterfell.”

Johnathan agreed.

“He is right.”

Catelyn looked toward the door.

“The children.”

“Are protected,” Ned said. “For now.”

Benjen stepped closer.

"You said dragonglass matters."

"Yes."

"How?"

"It can kill the Others."

Luwin's eyebrows rose.

"Obsidian."

"Yes."

"How certain?" Ned asked.

"In the old future, an Other was killed by a dragonglass dagger."

"Who?" Benjen asked. Johnathan hesitated. The name would mean nothing to them yet.

"A brother of the Night's Watch."

"Which brother?"

"Samwell Tarly."

Benjen frowned.

"I know no man by that name."

"He has not reached the Wall."

"You know he will."

"In the old path."

Benjen accepted the distinction reluctantly. Johnathan continued.

"The dead men raised by the Others are different. Fire destroys them. Dragonglass may harm them, but I know fire works."

"Steel?" Ned asked.

"Ordinary steel is unreliable against the Others. Their weapons can shatter it."

Benjen's expression darkened.

"Waymar Royce."

"Yes."

"Valyrian steel?"

"I believe it can kill them, but I cannot prove that from the events I remember."

Ned glanced toward the place where Ice would normally rest.

"How much dragonglass does Winterfell possess?" Benjen asked. Luwin answered.

"Several pieces in the collections. Arrowheads, tools, ceremonial blades. Nothing approaching an armory."

"Dragonstone has more," Johnathan said. Everyone looked at him.

"The island contains large deposits beneath the mountain."

Benjen's expression became almost amused.

"Stannis again."

"Yes."

"Convenient."

"For once."

Ned looked toward Luwin.

"Begin an inventory of every piece of dragonglass in Winterfell."

"I will."

"No one is told why."

"Of course."

Benjen said, "I want a message sent to Mormont." Ned considered it.

"After Robert arrives. A sealed message concerning the missing ranging and the need to search the Watch's stores."

"The Wall has waited long enough."

"One night," Ned said. "Robert's men now watch every raven leaving Winterfell, whether they admit it or not. We send nothing hurriedly."

Benjen disliked the delay. He accepted his brother's judgment.

"One night."

Johnathan looked around the room. The conversation had remained controlled. No one had shouted.

No one had struck him. No one had learned Jon's parentage. No secret letter had been sent. Bloodraven had been discussed without becoming an immediate certainty.

Stannis had been named without Johnathan deciding to manipulate him alone. This was what changing the story should have looked like from the beginning. Not prophecies thrown across a hall. People sharing incomplete knowledge, disagreeing, and choosing carefully. It felt slower. It was probably safer. Ned looked at Johnathan.

“Tomorrow you stand beside Luwin.”

“Yes.”

“You remain Doctor Harrow.”

“Yes.”

“You do not stare at Jaime or Cersei.”

“No.”

“You do not examine the royal children with your eyes.”

“I will not.”

“You do not speak to Tyrion unless he speaks first.”

Johnathan hesitated. Ned saw it.

“What?”

“He will speak first.”

“You sound certain.”

“He notices unusual things.”

Benjen looked Johnathan over.

“You qualify.”

Ned continued.

“If he speaks, answer as Doctor Harrow.”

“Nothing about books, dragons, or the future.”

“Nothing.”

Catelyn looked toward him.

“And Bran?”

“Remains on the ground.”

“You promised another story.”

“Yes.”

“What story?”

“I have not decided.”

“Choose before speaking.”

“That is excellent advice.”

“It should not be new.”

“It is not. Following it is new.”

Ned opened the door. The meeting was over. As the others began leaving, Luwin remained beside the table. Ned noticed.

“What is it?”

The maester looked toward Johnathan.

“Mara and her son remain alive.”

Ned’s attention sharpened.

“I was told there had been trouble.”

Luwin’s voice became quieter.

“Trouble does not describe it.”

Catelyn looked toward her husband.

“The child lay across the womb. It could not be born.”

“And Doctor Harrow intervened,” Ned said. Luwin nodded.

“He cut into her abdomen and womb, removed the child, restored its breathing, stopped her bleeding, and closed the wounds.”

Ned stared at Johnathan.

“You did this today?”

“Yes.”

“And she lives?”

“For now.”

Luwin shook his head.

“That is how he insists upon saying it. Yet she is awake, speaking, and feeding her son.”

Benjen looked at Johnathan differently. Not with trust. Not yet. With recalculation. Ned said, “Could another maester have done it?” Luwin answered before Johnathan could.

“No.”

The certainty surprised everyone.

“I would have remained beside her until the womb tore or her strength failed. Goodwife Mella would have done the same. We would have called it the will of the gods because we possessed no other answer.”

Luwin touched his chain.

“What he knows is not a collection of clever tricks. His medicine stands perhaps a thousand years beyond ours.”

Johnathan looked uncomfortable.

“I had help.”

“That does not alter the distance.”

Ned studied him.

“You arrived claiming to be a physician.”

“I am.”

“Today you proved it.”

Johnathan looked toward Catelyn. She gave him the smallest nod. Not forgiveness. Not complete trust. Recognition. For today, that was enough. --The final hours before sunset passed beneath a sky the color of old iron. Johnathan returned to Mara’s chamber twice. Her pulse gradually slowed. The bleeding remained light. She drank several mouthfuls of water without becoming sick. Her son slept against her chest and woke to feed. Goodwife Mella followed every instruction with fierce seriousness.

When one servant attempted to touch the baby without washing, Mella struck the woman’s hand away.

“Lord Soap’s rules.”

Johnathan heard from the doorway. He decided not to object. In the yard, Rickon practiced the word leave while Shaggydog ignored him and attempted to swallow the rawhide strip from the wrong end. Arya struck a wooden post with her broomstick sword until the cloth handle loosened. Sansa rehearsed the names and titles of royal visitors with Septa Mordane. Robb inspected the stable arrangements beside Jory. Jon remained in the godswood longer than anyone expected.

Bran stayed with Summer. He did not climb. Johnathan saw him examine a broken latch near the kennels, speak with a limping guard, and ask a kitchen girl why smoke gathered beneath one roof more heavily than another. The story had taken root. Any bird can look down. A lord must learn to look around. Johnathan had invented that part.

Bran did not know. Perhaps inventions could become truths when people chose to live by them. Near dusk, Johnathan joined Luwin upon a covered walkway overlooking the inner yard. Below them, the final advance wagons entered Winterfell. The gates remained open long enough for a mounted scout to pass through at speed. The rider dismounted before Ned and delivered his message. Luwin watched the exchange.

“What do you think he said?”

“That the king is close.”

“A guess.”

“Yes.”

“You are becoming more disciplined.”

“Do not sound so surprised.”

“I have observed your history.”

The scout bowed to Ned, remounted, and rode toward the stables. Moments later, Jory began issuing orders. Extra torches were placed near the gate. Men moved toward the walls. The message had been what Johnathan expected. Robert would arrive after sunrise. The ravens had left the roof.

Johnathan looked toward the empty stones where they had gathered.

“I frightened everyone over hungry birds.”

“You reported a concern.”

“That is a polite way of saying it.”

“You clearly distinguished memory from evidence and possibility from certainty.”

Johnathan looked at him.

“Are you praising me?”

“I am recording improvement.”

“That is close enough.”

Luwin rested both hands upon the stone rail.

“Do you believe Bloodraven watched you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you believe he watched Bran?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you believe the king’s arrival will follow the history you remember?”

“No.”

Luwin nodded.

“Three honest answers.”

“They are not useful.”

“They prevent false certainty from becoming action.”

Johnathan watched Bran cross the yard with Summer beside him.

“They do not tell me how to save them.”

“No.”

“That is what I hate.”

Luwin looked toward the children.

“You came here believing knowledge made you responsible for every life you recognized.”

“They died terribly.”

“Many people die terribly.”

“That does not make it acceptable.”

“No. It makes your task larger than any one man can complete.”

Johnathan’s hands tightened upon the stone.

“I have abilities no one else possesses.”

“You also possess ignorance no one else can measure.”

“That sounded less encouraging.”

“It was intended to be accurate.”

Below, Bran stopped beside Jon. For several breaths, neither boy spoke. Then Bran held something out. A piece of bread. Jon accepted it. They walked together toward the Great Keep, Ghost and Summer following. Johnathan watched them disappear inside.

“I almost told him,” he said.

“Jon?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you stop?”

“Ned asked me to.”

“Only that?”

Johnathan considered it.

“No. Jon deserves the truth, but he deserves it from the man who carried it for fourteen years.”

Luwin nodded.

“You are learning.”

“Painfully.”

“Most learning is.”

Johnathan looked toward the windows of the birthing chamber. Warm light glowed behind the shutters. A child began crying inside. The sound carried faintly into the yard. Luwin followed his gaze.

“In the Citadel, I forged links in healing, ravenry, sums, history, and the higher mysteries.”

“You were busy.”

“I once believed each link represented a boundary of useful knowledge. Today, I watched you step beyond one of those boundaries as though it were a line drawn in dust.”

Johnathan said nothing. Luwin continued.

“You told me your medicine was built by generations.”

“Yes.”

“Then you will teach me.”

Johnathan looked toward him.

“Some of it.”

“All of it.”

“I cannot teach you everything at once.”

“I did not say at once.”

“You may not like what it requires.”

“What does it require?”

“Questioning traditions. Testing assumptions. Recording failures. Admitting when treatments do nothing. Washing your hands until everyone calls you Lord Soap.”

Luwin considered that.

“I will accept a less dignified title if the knowledge saves lives.”

Johnathan smiled.

“That may be the most modern thing you have said.”

“I do not know whether that was praise.”

“It was.”

The gates began closing for the night. Heavy chains moved through the gatehouse. Wood and iron settled into place with a sound that carried across the yards. Outside the walls, the kingsroad disappeared south through darkening fields and forest. Somewhere beyond sight traveled Robert Baratheon, Cersei Lannister, Jaime Lannister, Joffrey, Myrcella, Tommen, Tyrion, Sandor Clegane, Kingsguard, knights, servants, wagons, horses, and every danger Johnathan remembered. Behind Winterfell’s walls waited Ned, Catelyn, Robb, Jon, Sansa, Arya, Bran, Rickon, Benjen, Luwin, and six young direwolves.

Bran remained alive. His body remained whole. The broken tower stood empty and watched. In another chamber, a woman who should have died held a son who should never have drawn breath. For one more night, Winterfell belonged to the wolves. At dawn, the stag would enter. The lions would follow.

Johnathan touched the plain brown wool covering his chest. No dragon showed upon it. No weapon hung from his belt. No one outside the trusted circle knew he could pass through stone, survive a blade, or lift more weight than several men. Tomorrow, he would stand beside Maester Luwin and appear harmless. He would bow with the household. He would speak only when addressed.

He would watch without staring. He would remember that Cersei was a frightened mother as well as a dangerous queen, that Jaime had not yet thrown Bran from a window, that Joffrey was still a child becoming cruel, and that Tyrion had committed none of their crimes. He would remember that knowing what people might become did not erase what they were now. Luwin turned from the rail.

“You should return to your chamber.”

Johnathan looked toward the darkening yard.

“I do not sleep.”

“You may still remain somewhere predictable.”

“Freedom with walls.”

“Yes.”

They walked back together. Near the stair, a servant passed carrying a basket of fresh bandages. She bowed slightly.

“Doctor Harrow.”

Johnathan stopped for half a breath. Not ghost. Not sorcerer. Not singer. Doctor Harrow. He nodded.

“Good evening.”

The servant continued. Luwin looked toward him.

“You appear pleased.”

“I am.”

“It is only a name.”

“No.”

Johnathan looked back toward the chamber where Mara and her son slept beneath careful watch.

“It is something I know how to be.”

They continued toward his room. Outside Winterfell, hundreds of royal campfires burned along the kingsroad. Inside, wolves settled beside children who did not yet understand how close the old future had come. No hidden voice spoke through a raven. No prophecy arrived. No vision showed Johnathan what tomorrow would bring. For the first time since entering this world, he prepared to face the unknown without pretending it was memory.

At dawn, King Robert Baratheon would enter Winterfell. The last quiet day was over.

CHAPTER 10

THE ROAD BEFORE DAWN

Johnathan did not return to his chamber.

He made it halfway across the inner yard before stopping beneath the covered walk that connected the Great Keep to one of Winterfell's older towers.

The castle had quieted, but it had not gone to sleep.

Not tonight.

Servants still crossed the yard carrying baskets of bread, folded blankets, fresh rushes, firewood, and everything else required to receive a king before sunrise. Stable hands moved between stalls with lanterns. Guards changed posts along the walls. Somewhere beyond the inner gate, a southern voice complained loudly about the quality of northern hay.

Outside Winterfell, hundreds of royal campfires burned along the kingsroad.

Johnathan could not see them from where he stood, but he remembered the orange lights beyond the walls.

Robert Baratheon was close.

Cersei was close.

Jaime.

Joffrey.

Tyrion.

All the people Johnathan had expected to meet tomorrow.

For most of the evening, he had accepted that.

He would stand beside Maester Luwin. Bow. Speak when spoken to. Watch everyone carefully and avoid doing anything stupid.

That had been the plan.

Johnathan had become suspicious of plans that sounded reasonable.

He looked toward the Great Keep.

Then he went inside.

The guard outside Eddard Stark's solar knew him now. That alone felt strange.

Two weeks earlier, guards had pointed spears at Johnathan because his arm had disappeared through a man's hand. Now the man at the door merely frowned.

"Lord Stark is occupied."

"I know."

"He gave orders not to be disturbed unless the matter was urgent."

"It is."

The guard studied him.

Johnathan waited.

He had finally learned that filling silence usually made things worse.

The guard knocked.

A voice answered from within.

The man opened the door far enough to speak quietly through the gap. A short exchange followed.

Then the door opened wider.

"You may enter."

Johnathan stepped inside.

Ned sat behind a broad wooden table crowded with parchment. A candle burned near his right hand. Another had guttered low enough that wax had pooled around the iron holder.

Maester Luwin stood beside the table with a narrow roll of parchment in one hand.

Neither man looked pleased to see him.

Ned looked tired.

That seemed reasonable. In a few hours, his closest friend would ride through his gates carrying an offer that had once begun the destruction of his family.

Except now Ned knew that.

Johnathan had already changed that much.

"What happened?" Ned asked.

"Nothing."

Luwin lowered his parchment.

"You told the guard the matter was urgent."

"It is."

"But nothing happened."

"Not yet."

Ned leaned back slightly.

Johnathan heard how that sounded.

He tried again.

"I need to leave Winterfell."

Neither man answered.

Johnathan had expected surprise.

Instead, Ned simply watched him.

Luwin spoke first.

"When?"

"Before dawn."

That received a reaction.

Ned's expression hardened.

"The king reaches my gates at dawn."

"That's why."

Luwin placed the parchment on the table.

"You spent the last several days learning how to exist beneath a false history prepared specifically for the king's arrival."

"I know."

"You practiced your answers."

"I know."

"You allowed three servants to argue over which clothing made you look least suspicious."

"That part wasn't my idea."

"You agreed to stand with me when the royal party entered."

Johnathan nodded.

"I changed my mind."

Ned's voice remained quiet.

"Why?"

Johnathan pulled out the chair opposite him but did not sit.

"I came here because I wanted to save your family."

Ned's eyes sharpened.

Johnathan continued before the sentence could become something larger than he intended.

"That was the first thing I thought when I understood where I was. Bran was going to fall. You were going south. Jon Arryn was dead. I knew what happened after that."

"You knew what happened before you changed it," Luwin said.

"Yes."

Johnathan looked at Ned.

"Bran never fell."

Ned's face did not move.

"You know why he would have."

"Yes."

"You know what Jon Arryn discovered."

"Yes."

"You know Peter Baelish cannot be trusted."

A muscle moved along Ned's jaw.

"Yes."

Johnathan nodded toward the papers on the table.

"And you know something is moving beyond the Wall."

That changed the room.

The king suddenly seemed less important.

Luwin folded his hands inside his sleeves.

Ned said, "Benjen heard your warning."

"Yes."

"He has agreed to carry it back to the Watch. That is not proof of every claim you made."

"I know."

"You have been wrong before."

"I know that too."

Ned waited.

Johnathan finally sat.

"I don't need you to believe every detail. I need you to prepare for the possibility that I'm right."

"We have begun."

"Winterfell has."

Ned frowned.

Johnathan leaned forward.

"The Long Night isn't a Winterfell problem."

The words sounded too large for the little room.

He lowered his voice.

"If the dead come south, one castle won't stop them. One house won't. The Night's Watch can't do it alone. They'll need men, food, weapons, horses, ships, healers, smiths, dragonglass, information, alliances, and a great deal of coin."

Luwin watched him carefully.

Ned said, "And you intend to gather all of that yourself."

"No."

Johnathan almost smiled.

"That would be insane."

Luwin's eyebrow moved.

Johnathan corrected himself.

"More insane than usual."

Ned did not smile.

"What do you intend?"

That was harder.

Johnathan had spent the walk across the inner yard thinking about exactly that question.

"I need to learn."

"You already claim knowledge of what is coming."

"Knowledge from books."

He tapped two fingers against the table.

"I know names. Battles. betrayals. A few places. Some weapons. Pieces of history. I don't know how much grain feeds ten thousand men through a northern winter. I don't know what a ship costs. I don't know how armies are supplied. I can't

properly ride. I've held a sword for practice and would probably embarrass a twelve-year-old with one."

Ned's mouth tightened slightly.

Johnathan suspected that was the closest he would get to amusement.

"I know how to keep a wounded man alive. That isn't enough."

Luwin said, "So you mean to become a soldier."

"I mean to learn enough that I stop being useless when swords come out."

"Those are not the same thing."

"No."

Johnathan glanced at the maps stacked against the wall.

"I also need money."

Ned's expression changed.

"Money."

"Yes."

"You arrived with nothing."

"That's part of the problem."

"You have food. Clothing. Shelter."

"Here."

Ned understood.

Johnathan continued.

"I can't spend the next few years asking Winterfell for permission every time I need a horse, a book, a room, a ship, or supplies. If I'm going to prepare for something this large, I need resources that belong to me."

Luwin considered him.

"Years."

Johnathan looked at him.

"The Wall may fall years from now. Or things may happen faster because I've changed events. I don't know anymore."

That was the part he hated.

Not knowing had once been normal.

Now it felt like walking through a hospital after every label had been removed from every medication.

Ned rose and crossed toward the narrow window.

Beyond the glass, Winterfell remained dark.

"You ask me to let a man with impossible abilities leave my protection on the night before the king enters my castle."

"Yes."

"You know secrets that could plunge the realm into war."

"Yes."

"You know things about my family that I would kill to protect."

Johnathan held Ned's gaze.

"Yes."

"And you expect me to agree."

Johnathan thought for a moment.

"No."

That seemed to surprise Ned.

"I expect you to understand why I'm asking."

Luwin moved closer to the table.

"Where would you go?"

Johnathan hesitated.

That answer had changed several times in his head.

"The Wall was my first thought."

Ned waited.

"But Benjen is already here. He knows what I told you, and the Watch will have the warning when he returns. Arriving at Castle Black alone claiming knowledge of dead men sounds like a good way to get locked in another tower."

Luwin said, "You have experience with that."

Johnathan looked at him.

The maester's face remained perfectly serious.

Johnathan pointed once.

"That was almost a joke."

"It was not."

"It was."

Ned ignored them.

"Where?"

"White Harbor."

Luwin looked toward Ned.

Johnathan noticed.

"Is that a bad idea?"

"No," Ned said.

That made Johnathan more suspicious.

"Then why did you both do that?"

Luwin answered.

"Because White Harbor is the first sensible destination you have proposed."

"Good."

"It remains several weeks away for an ordinary traveler in difficult weather."

"I'm not an ordinary traveler."

"No," Luwin said. "You are a man who barely knows which end of a horse requires feeding."

"I know which end."

"That was not the challenge."

Johnathan let it go.

Ned returned to the table.

"Why White Harbor?"

"Ships. Trade. Money. Travelers. Information."

He paused.

"And because if I start announcing myself in King's Landing, everyone with a crown or a knife will eventually want something from me."

"White Harbor has knives," Ned said.

"I assumed."

"It also has thieves, smugglers, sailors, merchants, sellswords, and men who would murder you for less silver than the boots you wear."

Johnathan looked down at the boots.

"They're your boots."

"Then I would rather not lose them."

Johnathan almost laughed.

Ned had not meant it as a joke.

Probably.

Luwin picked up a quill.

"If he goes to White Harbor, Lord Manderly should know he comes with your protection."

Johnathan shook his head.

"Not too much protection."

Ned looked at him.

"Explain."

"I don't want to arrive looking like your agent."

"You are under my protection."

"That's different from everyone thinking I speak for House Stark."

Ned accepted that distinction with a slight nod.

Luwin said, "A letter of introduction, then. Nothing more."

"That would help."

"What would it say?"

Johnathan considered.

"That I'm a physician from a distant land."

"True."

"That you found me strange but useful."

Luwin's mouth moved.

Ned said, "I will choose the wording."

"Probably wise."

Silence settled again.

Johnathan looked toward the candle.

He had said the practical things.

The rest was harder.

"If I stay tomorrow, Robert meets me."

Ned said nothing.

"Cersei may meet me. Jaime. Tyrion. Joffrey. Someone asks where I'm from. Someone notices something wrong with me. Someone hears a rumor from a guard who heard it from a kitchen boy who heard that I walked through stone."

"The men who know have been ordered to silence."

"That has never stopped a rumor in human history."

Ned could not argue with that.

"I don't know what meeting them changes," Johnathan continued. "Maybe nothing. Maybe everything. The old future is already damaged enough that I'm guessing more than I like."

"Yet you mean to travel among strangers."

"Strangers don't know what questions to ask."

That answer made Luwin uncomfortable.

Johnathan understood why.

He spread his hands on the table.

"I'm not abandoning you."

Ned's gaze stayed on him.

"I need to make that clear."

"You are free to leave," Ned said.

Johnathan stared.

Luwin looked toward Ned.

Johnathan had prepared himself for an argument.

Apparently he had wasted several excellent points.

"Just like that?"

"No."

There it was.

Ned continued.

"You are free to leave because I gave my word that you were not my prisoner."

Johnathan sat back.

"But if you leave, you leave knowing what travels behind you."

"The king."

"The king, the queen, their children, the Kingslayer, half the court, and enough Lannister men to turn suspicion into blood before breakfast."

"I know."

"If any of them discover what you told me, I cannot protect you from White Harbor."

"I know."

"If you speak of Jon..."

"I won't."

Ned's voice sharpened.

"If you speak of him to anyone."

"I won't."

"Not to a lord. Not to a maester. Not to someone you trust. Not because you believe the truth will help him."

Johnathan met his eyes.

"I understand."

Ned watched him long enough to make certain.

Then he nodded once.

"And the queen's children?"

Johnathan exhaled.

"That secret is already yours."

"It is not mine to reveal carelessly."

"No."

"You will not spread it."

"No."

Luwin said, "And Petyr Baelish?"

"I don't intend to announce that he's dangerous."

"Why?"

"Because if he learns someone knows what he is doing, he'll change what he is doing."

Ned's expression darkened.

Johnathan added, "You should assume that about anyone I've warned you about."

That was enough.

No second lecture.

Ned rested both hands on the table.

"What will you tell people about yourself?"

Johnathan looked at Luwin.

"The lie we already built."

Luwin nodded.

"Doctor Johnathan Harrow. From Ohio, beyond the eastern maps. Reached White Harbor by ship. Lost your possessions on the road."

"Yes."

Ned said, "You cannot spend your life repeating the same story to every man you meet."

"No."

That thought had already bothered Johnathan.

Stories became fragile when too many people touched them.

"Then I won't tell everyone my name."

Luwin's eyes narrowed slightly.

Johnathan continued.

"Most travelers don't need my history. If someone asks, I'm Johnathan. If they don't ask, I'm nobody important."

"You are poor at being nobody important," Luwin said.

"I can practice."

Ned walked to a chest near the wall.

He unlocked it.

Johnathan heard the metal before he saw what Ned removed.

A small leather purse.

Ned placed it on the table.

Johnathan did not touch it.

"How much?"

"Enough to reach White Harbor without begging."

"That's vague."

"It is intentionally vague."

Johnathan opened the purse.

Silver coins.

A few copper stars.

He looked up.

"I'll pay you back."

"No."

"I'd rather."

"No."

"Ned."

Both Luwin and Ned looked at him.

Johnathan realized too late that he had stopped using the title.

He corrected himself.

"Lord Stark."

Ned did not appear offended.

"You warned my house before you owed us anything. You treated my people. You helped a woman and child today."

Johnathan thought of Mara.

"That wasn't payment."

"Neither is this."

Ned pushed the purse closer.

"Take it."

Johnathan did.

"Thank you."

Luwin reached for another sheet of parchment.

"I will prepare a list of places along the road."

"I know the map."

"You know a drawing."

"Fair."

"And you will not walk alone through every forest because wolves cannot bite you."

"Probably not."

Luwin stopped writing.

Johnathan looked away.

"Fine. I will attempt good judgment."

"That is less comforting than you believe."

Ned sat again.

"You leave through the Hunter's Gate."

Johnathan looked back.

"The same gate where your men arrested me."

"Yes."

"Nice symmetry."

Luwin ignored him.

"The king's outriders hold the main approaches. The Hunter's Gate will be quieter before dawn."

"Good."

"I will have clothing prepared."

"I have clothing."

"You have two tunics, one pair of boots, and a cloak borrowed from my household."

Johnathan looked down at himself.

"Three tunics."

"One has blood on it."

"Mara's."

"Which leaves two."

Johnathan conceded.

"I'll take clothing."

Ned said, "A knife."

"I don't know how to use one."

"You know which end is sharp."

"Luwin has been teaching you jokes."

"He has not."

Luwin's expression suggested deep offense.

Ned continued.

"You carry it because roads are dangerous."

"A knife won't do much for me."

"It may do something for the man beside you."

That stopped Johnathan.

He nodded.

"All right."

"A horse?"

Johnathan hesitated.

Then shook his head.

"I'll walk."

Ned stared at him.

"To White Harbor."

"Eventually."

"You will freeze."

"No."

Ned knew that.

Johnathan continued.

"I don't tire the way other people do. A horse needs food, water, sleep, shelter, shoes, and someone who knows what he's doing."

"You admit your limits."

"I'm growing."

Luwin said, "Slowly."

Johnathan looked at him.

"I am leaving before I become violent."

"Another sign of growth."

Ned rubbed one hand across his beard.

"You mean to walk faster than a horse."

"I mean to walk longer."

That answer satisfied him more.

Ned looked toward the dark window.

"How will you send warnings?"

"Ravens."

"From where?"

"Any castle or town with a rookery that will let me near one."

"You think lords allow strangers to send ravens wherever they please?"

"No."

Johnathan tapped the Stark letter that did not yet exist.

"But being able to say Lord Eddard Stark knows me may help."

Ned considered.

"If you send word, use my name."

"I thought we wanted me quiet."

"For matters concerning the dead, you send directly to Winterfell. Not to the king. Not to the Citadel. Not to every lord between here and Dorne."

Johnathan nodded.

"Agreed."

"If you learn something that threatens my family?"

"I send word."

"If events begin matching the future you remember?"

"Word."

"If you hear that I have gone south?"

Johnathan paused.

That question carried weight.

"Then I send more than a raven."

Ned's eyes held his.

Johnathan did not explain.

He did not need to.

Luwin broke the silence.

"And if Winterfell needs you?"

Johnathan looked at him.

"Send a raven to White Harbor first."

"You may not remain there."

"I'll leave instructions when I move."

"With whom?"

"Someone trustworthy."

Luwin gave him a long look.

"I'll find someone."

"That sentence has caused considerable trouble since your arrival."

Johnathan smiled faintly.

Ned rose.

"Then it is decided."

Johnathan stood as well.

The decision felt strangely small.

No thunder.

No omen.

No raven landing upon the windowsill.

He had entered the room intending to ask for freedom.

Ned simply gave it to him.

Johnathan reached the door, then stopped.

"Lord Stark."

Ned waited.

"I meant what I said."

"About what?"

"Your family."

Ned's face became unreadable.

Johnathan did not turn it into a speech.

"I came here to keep them alive."

Ned nodded once.

"Then do not die on the road."

Johnathan opened the door.

"I'll do my best."

Luwin followed him into the passage.

They walked in silence until the solar door closed behind them.

Then Luwin said, "Your best is frequently alarming."

Johnathan smiled.

"I'll miss you too."

"I did not say I would miss you."

"No."

They continued down the stairs.

"You absolutely will."

This time Luwin did not answer.

That was answer enough.

The traveling clothes arrived before the letter.

Johnathan returned to his chamber and found three folded bundles waiting on the bed.

A heavy brown tunic.

Two lighter wool shirts.

Dark breeches.

Wool stockings.

A second pair of boots.

Gloves.

A thick charcoal cloak with a deep hood.

A smaller oilskin cloak rolled tightly for rain.

A leather belt.

A waterskin.

A bedroll.

A pack large enough to carry more than Johnathan actually needed.

Someone had also included dried meat, hard bread, cheese, and a small pouch of salt.

Johnathan held up the bread.

"Luwin."

The maester stood near the table.

"Travelers eat."

"I barely need to."

"Travelers are also observed."

Johnathan put the bread into the pack.

"Good point."

The knife arrived last.

Not a sword.

Thank God.

The blade was short, practical, and plain. A working knife rather than a weapon meant to impress anyone.

Johnathan tested the balance.

"Try not to cut yourself," Luwin said.

Johnathan looked at him.

The maester sighed.

"Yes. I remember."

Johnathan slid the knife into its sheath.

His Targaryen pajamas sat folded inside a small wooden chest near the wall.

He opened it.

Red dragons stared upward from black cloth.

For a moment, he considered bringing them.

He closed the chest.

"No."

Luwin watched him.

"They remain yours."

"Keep them safe."

"I assumed you would take them."

"If someone searches my pack and finds perfect repeating Targaryen dragons made from cloth nobody recognizes, my quiet journey becomes less quiet."

"Reasonable."

Johnathan looked at the chest again.

"And if I lose everything else, I'd rather know one piece of home is somewhere safe."

Luwin rested one hand on the lid.

"I will keep them."

"Thank you."

Johnathan began packing.

He did not need much.

Clothing.

Food mostly for appearances.

Coin.

Knife.

Bedroll.

A small bundle of bandages Luwin insisted upon.

Needle and thread.

A little boiled wine in a sealed flask.

Two small containers of salve.

A whetstone he did not know how to use properly.

Flint and steel.

Parchment.

Ink.

A quill.

Johnathan lifted the ink bottle.

"Traveling with this seems optimistic."

"Then do not overturn it."

"Excellent advice."

Luwin handed him a small wrapped packet.

"What is this?"

"Willow bark. Dried mint. Feverfew."

"For me?"

"For anyone you meet who is less difficult to injure."

Johnathan placed it carefully inside the pack.

"Good."

The charcoal cloak remained on the bed.

Johnathan picked it up.

The wool was thick and dark enough to disappear easily in poor light.

He pulled it around his shoulders and raised the hood.

Luwin watched.

"Too large?"

"No."

Johnathan walked toward the small polished metal mirror on the table.

The hood shadowed most of his face.

Not enough.

He could still see the pale skin.

Too pale.

People at Winterfell had become accustomed to it. Travelers would not.

When his body slipped toward the colder state, it became worse.

Stillness.

Pallor.

No mist when he breathed.

A face that invited questions before he opened his mouth.

Johnathan lowered the hood.

"Do you have spare dark cloth?"

Luwin frowned.

"For what?"

"I want to cover my face."

"Why?"

"Because this face helped start three different rumors before breakfast on my first day."

"You were barefoot beneath a castle wall wearing Targaryen sleeping clothes."

"That contributed."

"You also passed through a guard's hand."

"Also contributed."

Luwin opened one of the storage chests.

He found a narrow folded piece of dark grey wool.

Johnathan tested it against his face.

Too loose.

"Needle?"

Luwin handed him one.

Johnathan sat at the table.

His sewing skills were poor.

Not nonexistent.

Medical training had taught him how to close skin, which was unfortunately not the same as making clothing.

He folded the wool.

Cut it carefully with the knife.

Then began stitching.

Luwin watched for several minutes.

"That is crooked."

"I know."

"The left side is longer."

"I know."

"The lower seam will rub against your chin."

"It won't bother me."

"Other people will see it."

Johnathan stopped.

He removed two stitches.

"You're enjoying this."

"No."

"You are."

Luwin took the cloth from him.

"Give me that."

"I can do it."

"Clearly."

The maester sat.

His stitching was better.

Johnathan watched.

"You know how to sew."

"I have closed wounds longer than you have been alive."

"That's different."

"You said the same thing ten minutes ago."

Luwin adjusted the seam.

The result was simple.

A fitted lower face covering tied behind the head, high enough to conceal the nose and mouth, low enough that it did not interfere with Johnathan's eyes.

Johnathan pulled it on.

Then raised the charcoal hood.

He looked into the polished metal.

Only his eyes and the narrow strip around them remained visible.

Dark cloth covered everything else.

The reflection looked nothing like Doctor Johnathan Harrow.

Good.

Luwin stood behind him.

"You look like a thief."

"Better than a corpse."

Luwin did not answer immediately.

Johnathan saw the maester's eyes shift in the reflection.

That was answer enough too.

He adjusted the hood.

"If someone sees my face, they remember it."

"You intend to hide from everyone?"

"No."

Johnathan lowered the mask around his neck.

"Only when I don't want to be remembered."

Luwin's gaze moved toward the mask.

"That distinction may become difficult."

"Probably."

A knock came at the door.

Ned entered carrying a folded letter.

Johnathan stood.

The lord of Winterfell looked at the traveling clothes, the pack, then the dark cloth around Johnathan's neck.

"What is that?"

"A face covering."

"I see that."

Johnathan pulled it up.

Raised the hood.

Ned stared.

Johnathan lowered both.

"For the road."

"You look like an outlaw."

Luwin said, "That was my assessment."

"Wonderful."

Ned handed him the letter.

The grey direwolf of House Stark had been pressed into dark wax.

"Lord Wyman Manderly will receive you."

Johnathan turned the parchment over without breaking the seal.

"What did you tell him?"

"That Doctor Johnathan Harrow is a healer from a distant land who rendered service to Winterfell and may be of interest to his household."

"That's it?"

"You asked not to appear my agent."

"Perfect."

"There is one more line."

Johnathan looked up.

"Which is?"

"That I consider you under my protection."

Johnathan almost objected.

Then stopped.

There were times to be stubborn.

A road filled with armed strangers was probably not one.

"Thank you."

Ned nodded toward the pack.

"You leave in an hour."

"Before first light?"

"Yes."

"The king?"

"His camp has begun moving."

Johnathan looked toward the window.

Already.

Ned continued.

"You will be outside Winterfell before the royal banners reach the southern fields."

Good.

Johnathan slipped the letter into an inner pocket.

"Will anyone ask where I went?"

"Yes."

"What will you tell them?"

"That the foreign physician assisting Maester Luwin departed for White Harbor before the king's arrival."

Johnathan smiled slightly.

"The truth."

"Most useful lies begin there."

Johnathan looked at him.

Ned's expression remained grave.

Perhaps that had not been a joke either.

Johnathan was beginning to suspect northern humor required specialized training.

Ned moved toward the door.

Then stopped.

"One thing."

Johnathan waited.

"Do not mistake being difficult to kill for being impossible to kill."

Johnathan's smile disappeared.

"I don't."

"Good."

Ned left.

Johnathan stood quietly after the door closed.

Luwin began checking the pack again.

Johnathan let him.

The Hunter's Gate looked smaller from the inside.

Johnathan remembered waking beneath Winterfell's walls with no shoes, no heartbeat, and no idea what he had become.

He remembered the dog.

The spear.

Alyn's frightened face.

The rope sliding through his wrist.

Now he stood beneath the same gate wearing proper boots, a heavy cloak, gloves, a knife, a pack, and enough coin to survive among people who expected travelers to possess coin.

Progress.

Jory Cassel waited beside the gate.

Johnathan had not expected him.

Jory folded his arms.

"You're leaving."

"Apparently."

"I heard."

Johnathan looked at the gate.

"Does everyone know?"

"No."

"Good."

Jory examined the charcoal hood.

"What's that?"

Johnathan sighed.

"Everyone hates it."

"I didn't say I hated it."

"You were about to."

"It makes you look suspicious."

"I am suspicious."

"Fair."

Luwin joined them.
Two guards began lifting the bar.
Heavy wood scraped through iron brackets.
Beyond the gate waited darkness.
The snow outside reflected enough moonlight to show the
road disappearing between trees.
Johnathan adjusted the pack.
It barely felt heavy.
Jory noticed.
"That pack is full."
"Yes."
"You carry it like it's empty."
Johnathan deliberately shifted it as though the weight
bothered him.
Jory stared.
"Poorly done."
"I'm learning."
"Learn faster around strangers."
That was useful.
Johnathan nodded.
The gate opened.
Cold air moved into the passage.
Johnathan felt it against his face but no discomfort followed.
Far to the south, a horn sounded.
Low.
Distant.
Royal.
Every guard in the passage heard it.
Another horn answered from Winterfell's wall.
Jory looked toward the opening.
"They're coming."
Johnathan stepped outside.
Luwin followed him several paces into the snow.
The gate remained open behind them.
Johnathan turned.

For the first time since arriving in this world, there was no wall in front of him.

Only road.

Luwin held out one hand.

Johnathan looked at it.

Then took it.

The maester's grip was warm.

"Send word," Luwin said.

"I will."

"Not only when something is wrong."

Johnathan smiled.

"That sounds dangerously close to concern."

"Send word."

"I will."

Luwin released his hand.

Jory remained beneath the gate.

"No disappearing."

Johnathan looked at him.

"What?"

"While people can see you."

Johnathan understood.

"I'll try to remain disappointingly solid."

"Do that."

Johnathan started down the road.

He had gone perhaps twenty yards before Luwin called after him.

"Johnathan."

He turned.

The maester stood beneath the gate with his chain visible against his robes.

"If you find anything concerning the dead, the Others, dragonglass, old accounts, anything..."

"You'll get a raven."

Luwin nodded.

Johnathan raised one hand.

Then continued walking.
The gate closed behind him.
The sound reached him a few moments later.
Wood.
Iron.
Chains.
He did not turn around again.
The road bent east through the trees before eventually joining
larger roads toward White Harbor.
Johnathan walked quickly.
His boots broke through the thin crust over the snow.
The pack moved against his shoulders.
He felt no fatigue.
A mile passed.
Then another.
The eastern sky began to lighten.
Behind him, horns sounded again.
Robert Baratheon was reaching Winterfell.
Johnathan stopped beside a frozen stream.
Through the trees far behind him, he could barely make out
the highest towers.
He imagined the gates opening.
The king riding inside.
Ned waiting.
Catelyn beside him.
Bran safely on the ground.
Johnathan had once wanted desperately to witness that
moment.
Instead, he turned away from it.
There was too much else to do.
He pulled the dark cloth over his nose and mouth.
Raised the hood.
His reflection appeared faintly in the black surface of the
frozen stream.
Dark cloak.

Covered face.

Only the eyes remained.

No dragon.

No Stark wolf.

No house.

No banner.

Johnathan adjusted the strap of his pack and followed the road east.

By sunrise, Winterfell had vanished behind the trees.