

“You should not have promised such a thing to Jon.” Eddard said with suppressed anger at the actions of his second son.

“Why not? Jon is old enough to handle the truth.” Harry argued.

“No, he is not! You are not old enough to decide what is good and bad for Jon. He is my blood.” Eddard thundered.

“And Jon is my brother. He has lived to this day fearing his mother abandoned him, or you forcefully took him from his mother.” Harry retorted. “He deserves to get closure. Let him know the truth so that he could learn how much his mother loved him.”

“You think the truth won’t be any less painful? Now, he has a family. He thinks I’m his father. When the truth is revealed, he’ll have no one.” Eddard shouted before forcefully calming himself by taking a deep breath as he leaned against the Heart Tree in the godswood.

“You’re wrong, father. You underestimate Jon. He deserves to know the truth about his mother.”

“It’s too dangerous.” Eddard shook his head after a moment of silence. “There are many enemies out there that’d come after Jon if word of his parentage reached their ears.”

“The North has the strength to withstand any attack from any of those enemies.” said Harry.

“At what cost?” Eddard asked, narrowing his eyes at Harry.

“We have enough blood to spare, father. Besides, do you think the Northerners would sit idly by as some prissy southern lords turn hostile against House Stark? The House of Dragons are no longer in power, and the south is not strong enough to fight against the Winter Kings.” said Harry.

“There are no Winter Kings left in the North.” Eddard said heatedly.

“Of course, there is. I’m conversing with one.” said Harry, nodding at his father for emphasis.

“I’m no Winter King.” Eddard scoffed.

“Oh, but you are to the Northerners. Do you think the Northerners think of Stannis Baratheon as their king?” Harry smirked, seeing his father going silent. “You already know the answer, father. The lords of the North have already made their opinions clear, have they not?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ve sworn an oath of allegiance to Robert and now Stannis.” Eddard said firmly.

“Our family had sworn oaths to Targaryen kings, yet you fought against them and helped Robert Baratheon usurp their crown.” Harry pointed out.

“Aerys brought that upon his head as did Rhaegar with their actions.” Eddard defended himself.

“Still, you could’ve declared for Aegon VI and installed yourselves as his regents. Instead, you and your friend walked over the corpses of Rhaegar’s children to seize the Iron Throne.” Harry accused, making his father shoot a glare at him.

“That was not our doing. Tywin Lannister butchered those children.”

“And yet, your side benefited from it and rewarded Lord Tywin for his ‘loyalty’.” Harry gleefully pointed out, which made his father go silent.

“Tell you what, father. If Aegon VI was alive, would you fight for him or Stannis?” Harry asked.
“Which oath will you honour? The oath Torrhen Stark swore to Aegon or the one you swore to Robert Baratheon and Stannis Baratheon?”

“It does not matter. Rhaegar’s children are dead.” Eddard said with a sigh.

“What if I were to tell you that Aegon Targaryen, son of Rhaegar, actually lives?” Harry asked quietly, staring coolly at the wide eyes of his father.

“What! What did you say?” Eddard asked with wide eyes.

“Yes, father. Aegon, the sixth of his name, is not dead. Tywin Lannister never got his hands on Aegon that day. He was spirited away from the capital by Targaryen loyalists. And now, he has returned to Westeros to reclaim what he thinks is rightfully his.”

“No!” Eddard whispered in horror.

“Yes. War is coming for Stannis Baratheon. The southern kingdoms will be buried under rivers of blood as they fight war after war over that infernal throne. Do you think the lords of the North would fight for Stannis when Aegon comes for his throne?” Harry asked with a raised eyebrow.

As loyal as his father was to the Baratheons, Harry knew his father could also see the truth of the situation. In truth, the North was suffering from the absence of House Targaryen and their degradation as an old ally. The last dragonlords were feared and respected in the North not merely because they were riders of dragons but also because they gave the North nearly three centuries of peace. Despite all the hiccups the Targaryens faced in their reign, Aegon’s one promise stood firm throughout their reign. The North never faced an Andal invasion after Aegon was crowned king. Even when Baelor the Blessed reigned, the North remained the heart of First Men culture because the Small Council kept the fanatics at bay. Without the Targaryens at the helm, the Northerners were not keen to follow an offshoot family born from the last daughter of the Storm Kings. If the Targaryens were respected, the Baratheons were merely tolerated in the chaos of the Rebellion.

But all the goodwill House Targaryen earned after the Dance ended when Aerys Targaryen killed Rickard and Brandon Stark while the Mad King’s son kidnapped Lyanna Stark. Even after all these years, the exact reasons for Rhaegar’s actions were sketchy at best.

Bloodraven had told him about the song of ice and fire, but that whole story sounded like a load of crap to his ears. If Rhaegar had been set on taking a wife from the Starks, he could’ve done that by not marrying Elia Martell and approaching Rickard Stark with a marriage proposal down the line. Yet, nothing of the sort happened. By Bloodraven’s own admission, the Silver Prince never looked North until he chanced upon Lyanna Stark at Harrenhall. He had asked for more information, but Bloodraven was tightlipped.

Unfortunately, Harry could not discern whether his aunt went willingly or was spirited away by Prince Rhaegar. He was not mad enough to dip in the ocean of knowledge contained within the nodes of the weirwood trees. Those sacred trees were the abode of the Old Gods. Their power and knowledge was ancient and vast.

As powerful as he was, Harry was not idiotic enough to mess with the abode of gods. They were the most powerful in their realm, as the Valyrians found out painfully. If anyone needs to see the power of the Old Gods, one only needs to look at the Doom of Valyria.

“How do you know this, Harrion?” Eddard asked after a long moment of silence.

"I know many things, father. Trust me when I say that Aegon is already in Westeros, and he is gathering an army to his side in the shadows. The southern kingdoms will take sides, and war will be waged between friends and family alike." said Harry.

"Is that why you scheme with Lord Manderly? Are you preparing for war?" Eddard asked.

"No, father. I'm preparing for independence. The North's independence." said Harry.

They stared into each other's eyes. Grey met grey, and neither budged.

"We'll be alone and without allies once the southern kingdoms gather under one king." Eddard said with a sigh.

"You have me, the Northmen and Moat Cailin. We'll turn the Neck into the graveyard of the Andals. I'm sure their ancestors will like the company." said Harry, shrugging his shoulders.

"Aren't you forgetting about our enemies to the north?"

"How could I forget?" Harry rolled his eyes. "Trust me. I have a plan."

"You are playing with the lives of thousands, Harrion. I dislike the place we find ourselves in." Eddard grumbled. "Even if we can take advantage of the strife in the south to declare independence, the North will bleed in the future after our time."

"You're right, of course. There is no guarantee that we can maintain our current strength in the future. But I believe the southerners would think twice to wage war against the North in the future when we can field dragons against our foes." said Harry.

"What did you say?" Eddard asked with wide eyes.

"I think it's better to show you." Harry smirked, taking a shrunken wooden box from his pocket.

A few minutes later, Harry was afraid his father was about to suffer a heart attack. It was the first time his father came across an ice dragon. Winter had also grown as large as a horse, so it became even more intimidating for the Lord of Winterfell to accept the fact that an ice dragon was now standing inside the Godswood of Winterfell.

"How? How is this possible? Where did you find this...creature?" Eddard trailed off, staring at the icy blue dragon now quietly munching on the leaves from the Heart Tree.

"Her name is Winter, and she's an ice dragon. I found her egg in Skane and hatched her after I built Avalon." Harry explained.

"But... but... ice dragons are a myth." Eddard stuttered, staring incredulously at the dragon as it stopped munching on the red leaves of the tree and instead started shaving off small pieces of wood from the tree and began drinking the green paste that rolled down.

"As you well know, father, many myths have a grain of truth to them," said Harry, staring pointedly at his father.

"Is it dangerous?" Eddard asked hesitantly.

"Do you want to touch her? She's very friendly, and she does not eat meat. You needn't fear her." said Harry, leading a reluctant Eddard towards Winter.

The ice dragon had stopped drinking the sap of the Heart Tree when Harry brought his father close to it.

“Winter. This is my father, Eddard Stark.” Harry introduced his father to the ice dragon.

The corners of his mouth turned up when Winter placed her full weight on her hind legs and outstretched a clawed hand to his father as if to shake his hand. The incredulous look on his father’s face was a sight to behold.

“Ice dragons are fiercely intelligent.” Harry explained.

“My lord, what you’re suggesting is ambitious and dangerous.” Wyman Manderly said with a troubled look on his portly face as he stared at the map neatly laid out on the table.

“Also expensive and impossible.” Barbrey Dustin snarked, a disinterested look on her face while looking at the map with folded hands under her chin.

“It’s not impossible, and any expenses incurred will be covered by myself.” said Harry.

“Except for the lands we stand to lose to build your impossible canal.” Lady Barbrey said, shooting Harry a frosty look.

“On the contrary, I’d see you get duly compensated. I can buy the land from you at a reasonable price, of course.”

“Buy my land. I don’t think I agreed to anything, Lord Stark.” Lady Barbrey said snottily.

“And I don’t recall asking for your permission, my lady. I was stating what’s going to happen.” Harry said firmly, pinning down the haughty woman with his stare alone.

Lady Barbrey shook herself out of the stupor and glared at Harry.

“You are overreaching yourself, Harrion Stark. I’m the Lady of...”

“You are the widow of the late Lord Dustin. You remain the Lady of Barrowton by my father’s grace. Your title can be easily undone by the stroke of a quill. Keep that in mind, Lady Dustin.” Harry warned the haughty woman who thought herself to be some sort of grand player in the local politics of the North.

The North was a highly martial place that had no place for women who could not contribute to the defence of its people. The Mormont women were capable of ruling their island because they were warriors. For centuries, Mormont women had fought side by side with their kinsmen in defending the island. For this reason, a Mormont woman ruling Bear Island was not contested by anyone in the North. That was not the case for Lady Dustin. Harry doubted the woman had ever so much as used a kitchen knife in her life. She was a haughty, arrogant woman with a genuine grievance with his father, but that doesn’t mean he’d allow the snobbish idiot to walk all over him.

“I know when I’m not needed.” Lady Dustin said coldly before standing up from her seat with a glare.

“I will not be talked like...”

“Pettiness does not suit you, my lady. You may have genuine grievances with my family, but when it comes to the prosperity and security of the North, I expect you to put that aside and behave in a manner that befits your station. Otherwise, you’ll find me less forgiving than my father.” Harry said coldly. “Now sit down or welcome my enmity by holding on to your pettiness.”

There was a long moment of silence where Harry glared at Lady Dustin until the woman slowly sat down on her seat.

“Good. Now that we’ve dispensed with this childishness, we can discuss important matters. The proposed canal passes through the Neck, cutting through the lands belonging to House Dustin, House Stark and House Manderly North of Moat Cailin. House Manderly has a fleet to guard the mouth of the canal in the east, and therefore, I see no reason to purchase the land belonging to your family, Lord Wyman.” said Harry, nodding at the Lord of the White Harbour before setting his sights on Lady Dustin.

“The Dustin lands, on the other hand, is another issue. You lack a fleet to guard the mouth of the canal in the west. Either Lord Manderly’s fleet or mine own must guard the western mouth of the canal to deter the Ironborn from capturing the canal. If you were to sell the land the proposed canal passes through, it’d enable us to build fortifications and a small port to anchor our ships.”

“Why did you even invite me if you wanted to make all the decisions? Does my opinion have no meaning here?” Lady Barbrey asked, staring at Harry and Lord Manderly.

“If your opinion is not to build the canal, then it’s stupid and rejected categorically.” Harry deadpanned.

“Very well. Do as you please, boy. But keep in mind that I have allies, and I’ll see what Lord Stark has to say about all this.” Lady Barbrey said frostily before taking her leave from their meeting room.

“She does not understand the value of what you’re suggesting, Lord Harrion. With this canal, we’ll control one of the most lucrative trade routes in the known world.” Lord Wyman said, his eyes feasting on the line drawn representing the canal on the map.

“On the contrary, she knows the importance of the canal. She just doesn’t care, as her sole focus is to obstruct anything we do because of her grudge.” Harry muttered.

“That is dangerous, Lord Harrion. While Lady Dustin is a harmless mule, her family is not. Lord Ryswell is a foe that we can ill afford, and Lord Bolton is a queer fellow. Strange rumours come out of Dreadfort of dark deeds. The Leech Lord is family to Lady Dustin, for she has a nephew in the Bolton heir.”

Harry broke out in laughter upon hearing Lord Wyman call Barbrey Dustin a harmless mule. When his laughter subsided, Harry took the warning from Lord Manderly seriously. Making enemies of three major regional powers was not wise, so he came up with a quick solution on the spot. A simmering hatred for House Stark was buried inside Barbrey Dustin’s mind, not without cause. But stupid people with power and blind hatred were not a good combination.

‘Such a threat cannot be tolerated to exist.’ Harry mused.

“I’ll have a word with Lord Ryswell about this matter. He is a reasonable man.” said Harry for the benefit of Lord Manderly.

“That’s good, Lord Harrion. The North needs to be united when the time comes.” said Lord Wyman.

"I concur. Did you put some thought into my other proposal, Lord Manderly?" Harry asked, leaning forward in interest to hear what the Lord of White Harbour had to say.

"Minting new coins is dangerous, my lord. If the Iron Throne gets wind of our activities, we'll be declared traitors, and war will come to our shores before we are ready." Lord Wyman cautioned.

"And that's why they'll never know. I'm proposing we start a bank and mint new coins every year in preparation for the day we declare independence from the Iron Throne."

"A bank, you say." Lord Manderly sat up in interest.

"I take it you are interested, Lord Wyman." Harry smiled knowingly at the portly lord of White Harbour.

"Very interested. Very interested indeed." Lord Wyman whispered.

Eddard was relieved and a pinch happy that Jon had taken the truth with grace. He had expected Jon to become so angry and sad, but the boy had proven himself to be a good lad by taking in the truth patiently. Still, he was not sure whether telling the truth was the right thing to do. Even though Robert was dead and House Lannister was a shadow of its former self, he rightly feared for Jo's safety.

'Promise me, Ned. Promise me.'

He could still hear the sound of his sister in his ears as clear as day despite the passing of a decade. If he closed his eyes, he could even see the bloodied form of his sister.

'I hope I've not made a mistake today.' Eddard thought, eyeing Jon, sitting together with Benjen and Hannon while the hall was brimming with a festive air.

There were enough reasons for the lords of the North to be merry. The harvest was bountiful this year despite too many men having gone off to fight a war in the Westerlands. The yield was more in volume than last year, leaving many lords with the difficult task of storing the grain. He had even heard Lord Manderly complaining that there was too much grain to be shipped off, making it a hassle as White Harbour was struggling to sell the excess grain off. The devastation wrought upon the fields of the Reach had almost caused a massive famine in the south. But the harvests from the Riverlands and the North kept the south fed in these disconcerting times. Most lords of the North were now happy with their coffers full of gold and silver. The smallfolk were richer and healthier, and the old men of the North no longer had to sacrifice themselves for their families in winter.

In fact, winter itself was now a bygone threat in the North. The snows hardly fell on most farmlands. When they did, they did so sparingly. There was warmth everywhere, and that kept the smallfolk happy. All these miracles were attributed to his second son, and the goodwill that came with it was attributed to House Stark. If the Northerners respected the Starks in the past, they worshipped his family now. Those who had a lesser opinion about his wife on account of being a foreigner had shut up. Some had even gone as far as to say his wife brought great fortune to the North.

If Eddard had to take a guess, there was not a time in the North when the people both feared and respected House Stark this much. The element of fear was also a reality Eddard acknowledged. It was no secret Harrion brought down Lannisport and Casterly Rock. His son had also conquered two islands of the Iron Islands and smashed the Iron Fleet. Those accomplishments were enough to make people fear and respect Harrion's power.

It was one of the reasons why the Lords of the North consistently pursued a betrothal. Manderly, Karstark, Ryswell and many other houses had approached him, offering their daughters for Harrion and Robb.

Right now, he was holding another one of those betrothal offers. This time, it was from Dorne. Eddard had never bothered with informing his sons about the innumerable betrothal offers he received across the Seven Kingdoms. But this one was different. Prince Doran Martell was offering the hand of his daughter Princess Arianne in marriage for Harrion.

It was the first time a Princess of Dorne's hand was offered in marriage to a Stark in the North's history. Since Arianne Martell was the heiress of House Martell, Prince Doran was essentially offering them Dorne. If Harrion were to marry Princess Arianne, their children would rule Dorne. He wanted the best for his children, and he could only think of a royal match as a better offer than the current one.

On the other hand, Eddard was not blind to the danger of such a match. If his son spoke true, then Aegon Targaryen was gathering an army to reclaim the Iron Throne. While Harrion never divulged anything else, he could guess where Aegon Targaryen was safely plotting against House Baratheon. Undoubtedly, it was from Dorne with the support of the prince's uncles. If that was the case, he could see why Prince Doran was offering his daughter in marriage to House Stark.

'Prince Doran wants to court my son's growing power for Aegon's cause.' Eddard mused grimly.

However, Eddard could also see other benefits of such a match. Should Princess Arianne wed Harrion, the North could comfortably sit out any conflict. Perhaps the dreams of independence from the Iron Throne, which many of his Lords dreamed, would also become simpler if Harrion were to marry the Dornish princess. By some twisted fate, if Aegon Targaryen regained the Iron Throne, having his cousin married to Harrion might avoid war.

There were many possibilities that Eddard could see, but he preferred for Harrion to marry someone from the North. He had thought of Alys Karstark as a possible match for Harrion. Lord Rickard Karstark was a loyal lord and family in all but name. Having House Karstark tied closely to his family was only a boon for stability in the North.

"Ned. What are you doing here all by yourself?" Catelyn asked.

Eddard was brought out of his musings by his lady wife.

"This arrived today." said Eddard before giving the parchment to his wife.

He watched as his wife ran her eyes over the contents of the parchment.

"This is unexpected but not surprising." Catelyn slowly said.

"Oh?" Eddard raised an eyebrow curiously.

"Prince Oberyn must've had a reason for staying with Harrion for as long as he did. This is that reason," said Catelyn, placing the parchment in Eddard's hand.

“Hmm. You might be right. What do you think?” Eddard asked.

“Despite the prospect of our grandchildren becoming the princes of Dorne, I have my reservations. Dornish women tend to be promiscuous, and Harrion’s thoughts must also be considered. It’s not like we lack other options in the North or the southern kingdoms.”

“You’re right, of course.” Eddard nodded thoughtfully.

“My heart tells me Harrion is better off with a Northern woman, as does Robb. The Manderly girls are polite and comely. They’ll be good wives for the twins.” said Catelyn, nodding at the hall where Eddard noticed Robb dancing with one of the Manderly girls.

Eddard merely nodded and fell silent. He supposed he had to talk to the boys about their marriage as they were edging close to their namesday.