

Eddard enjoyed the peace and quiet offered by the Godswood. The gentle wind that caressed his skin and hair felt like the whispers from the Old Gods. The scattered hot springs inside the Godswood on the other hand provided him with the warmth and comfort of his dearly departed mother. The rustling leaves of the Weirwood trees on the other hand were akin to the laughter of his siblings from beyond the yoke of death. The faces carved on the trees on the other hand offered him the comfort that his father and the many ancient Starks who bore the name before him were watching over him.

Sitting here with his back against a tree he felt like he was amongst his family. It was peaceful and at the same time offered him a spiritual ambience.

He looked at Ice, the ancestral sword of House Stark. The sword has changed many hands in its long service to House Stark. Ice has stood by his family as a trusted friend in victory and defeat. In some ways, House Stark's histories were written with the tip of this sword.

Taking the whetstone into his hand he began grinding the edges of the Valyrian steel blade. It's said that Valyrian steel never loses its sharp edge. To those who make that claim, he could only shake his head. A good swordsman never shirks from taking care of his sword no matter the quality of the steel. The whetstone was not just a tool to sharpen the edges of the sword but also a reminder to keep the skill with a sword polished.

'A wise soldier knows the sword becomes an extension of oneself only when it reflects a part of his soul.' Eddard mused. 'And to put your soul in something is to love it and learn it.'

He knew every inch of the ancestral sword of his family. He knew every swing of his sword and where it'd land. He knew that because he treated Ice as a part of his being.

"Ned."

Eddard took his eyes away from Ice and instead fell on his wife.

"Cat? Are the children all right?" Eddard asked, pausing his activities.

"The children are all right but Ned... a raven came from Dragonstone."

"From Stannis?" Eddard frowned.

"No, not Lord Stannis. It's from Jon Arryn. Maester Luwin waits at your solar." said Catelyn.

"Jon Arryn?" Eddard blinked in surprise wondering why Jon was writing to Winterfell from Dragonstone instead of the Red Keep. "Did Luwin say anything?"

"No, husband. It has the seal of the office of the Hand. Luwin thought it prudent to break the seal in your presence."

"Very well then. Let's see what Jon has to say." Eddard said standing up and letting out a sigh. He got the distinct feeling that this had something to do with Harrion's visit.

Eddard fell into the chair in force after reading the contents of the message sent by Jon Arryn. Just as he suspected Harrion was involved. Only in this particular case, Harrion had only planted a Weirwood tree in Dragonstone with the permission of Lord Stannis and Lady Selyse. Whatever happened afterwards had nothing to do with his second son.

At least, he hoped that was the case.

Because he had never heard of Weirwood trees acting like Jon Arryn described in the message. It'd have been easy to believe that his son was responsible for the trees acting like life-sucking contraptions. However, he also likes to believe that the Old Gods have taken action against those zealot septons. Even his dear wife who was a staunch follower of the Seven took action against Septa Mordane when that woman called Harrion a demon. He had allowed the septa to stay and constructed the sept in Winterfell out of consideration for his lady wife. If his lady wife hadn't taken the necessary action, he'd have taken that woman's head with Ice.

Similarly, he got the feeling that more zealot septons start to crop up after the events that have transpired in Dragonstone become widely known.

"My lord. What should we do?" Maester Luwin asked.

"Send word to Lord Manderly and Lord Reed. I don't want any septon or septa or any religious zealots to cross into the North." Eddard ordered, after a moment of thought.

"As you will, Lord Stark."

Eddard watched in silence as Maester Luwin took his leave before turning to his wife.

"Should I write to father and seek his aid in pacifying the Faith?" Catelyn asked, her eyes full of concern.

Eddard thought it was an interesting proposition, one that he gave some serious consideration to before dismissing it. Lord Hoster Tully was his father-in-law and had helped him during the war but the man's ambition knows no bounds. While he'd certainly appreciate the Lord of Riverrun's aid, he knew for certain there'd be a price attached to that help. Most likely Lord Tully might be asking for something related to Harrion and he didn't want to put his son in the position he was in during the Rebellion. The time when wolves bowed to the lords of the south has come to an end. The reports he received from the Glovers and Manderlys were indications that he could now chart a different course for the North and House Stark.

"No, Cat. We shall not bother your father in this matter." Eddard said, measuring his words carefully. "These zealots are responsible for whatever happened to them. They should not have taken arms against the wishes of the Lord of Dragonstone and the Old Gods. If the Faith wishes to place blame on my son, then so be it. Winter will come for them just as it has come for the enemies of House Stark."

"Ned, the Faith is a dangerous foe. Even your friend, the King, might not be able to placate them if they truly intend to turn against our son." said Catelyn, directing a pleading look at her husband. "Let me travel to Riverrun and speak with my lord father. He could appeal together with Jon Arryn before the High Septon before this issue with Lord Stannis spiral out of control."

"No." Eddard said firmly. "The south might have forgotten what happened to Andalos when they poked the wolves. The North remembers. The time for us to meekly sit by has come to an end. If the south wishes ill-will upon my son who is blessed by the Old Gods, then the whole North will stand with him as will the gods."

"What if Robert sides with the Faith?"

"He won't." Eddard was sure of it.

"He might not have a choice. Robert might be the King of the Seven Kingdoms but he is also the defender of the Faith." said Catelyn.

“If that’s the case then Robert will have to remember that no septon fought for him at the Trident. He ascended the Iron Throne on the shoulders of the men of the North. If the north placed him on the throne and called him King then it can be undone just as easily.”

“Ned!” Catelyn looked at him in horror. “That’s treason.”

“Yes.” Eddard nodded grimly. “I’m well aware. Let’s hope it does not come to that.”

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“It’s fascinating, isn’t it?”

Harry eyed Spring who was watching him intently beneath the shade of the Heart Tree of Avalon.

“What is?” he inquired.

A strong gust of wind rustled the red leaves of the Heart Tree that were now towering over most of the buildings inside the castle save for the many towers along the walls. The wind carried a strong scent of the sea as well as a tint of something immaculate which was beyond the scope of any articulation. It was not just the air this unique quality was being imbued. He had noticed that there was a vibrance to every blade of grass, every square inch of soil and every gallon of water that could be found in Avalon.

“Release the boundless gift within you and open yourself to the world Harrion Stark. The Gods of the Forest have awakened and it’s all thanks to you. Their presence is no longer a passing whisper but a long melodious song.” said Spring, her chestnut-coloured hand pressed against the bark of the Weirwood tree.

Harry was jolted when he opened his senses and allowed the magic of the land to flow into his body. It was as if he took a dip in a small stream pouring down from a mountain carrying with it the rich minerals capable of cleansing all ailments known to mankind. But when he looked beyond the nourishing effect of the magic teeming around his castle his senses led him directly to the source.

‘So, these are the Old Gods of the Forest.’ Harry thought.

He could feel thousands upon thousands of pairs of eyes watching him silently judging him in a wide expanse of darkness. At the same time, he couldn’t feel any distinction from the gods. It was as if these Old Gods were coalesced into a single entity despite what its pluralistic name would otherwise imply. He was about to ask what they want with him but his awareness was cut off and he found himself in his body.

“You saw them, didn’t you?” Spring asked knowingly.

“Yes... yes, I did. They were very different from the last time I felt them.”

“That’s because the Old Gods were barely sustaining themselves. You’ve set them free from their slumber.” Said Spring making Harry blink owlshly.

“Me? What did I do?” Harry asked incredulously.

“Before the Andals invaded the Valyrians came to Westeros on the behest of their gods. They decimated our people in Dragonstone and took the island’s control from us. Using the island they weakened the Old Gods, so that they may invade us in our weakened state.” said Spring.

Harry doubted that particular story. If the Old Gods were as powerful as Spring said then they could’ve stood against the Valyrians. Although, he supposed the Valyrians might’ve had their own tricks up their sleeve like blood magic and dragons. Not to mention Spring did mention the involvement of the gods of Valyria which was not good news at all. In a way, he supposed even the Andal invasion could be considered a part of a plan by the Valyrian Freehold to weaken Westeros and the First Men kingdoms. The Valyrians fought the Ghiscari, Rhoynar and Andals in Westeros. Only the Ghiscari got burned out of their cities while the other two groups were forced to flee their homelands and somehow managed to land in Westeros without getting pursued by the Valyrians. He suspected the Valyrians may have thought to let the Rhoynar and Andals pass into Westeros so that their enemies can weaken themselves.

“So, the Old Gods are strong now?” Harry instead asked filing away his thoughts.

“Their presence is strong in the Weirwood trees. As days go by, their power will only grow.” said Spring.

“What does that mean for the continent and the people?”

“I honestly do not know. The Old Gods have been suppressed for thousands of years. How they’ll react is well beyond my capabilities.” said Spring, her yellow eyes staring intently at the Weirwood trees.

“Hmm.” Harry grunted.

Going by the looks of it he got the feeling that these Old Gods were not unhappy with him which was a good start. However, he knew these Old Gods or whatever entity that resides in the Weirwood trees was powerful in magic and loved to consume the natural magic of the land. So, if these Old Gods were now ‘awake’ would that mean they stop leeching magic? He didn’t know. The Ice Dragon certainly didn’t have a higher opinion about any gods and considered them foreign entities. Despite that, the ice dragons fought side by side with the Children and these Old Gods against the undead. Perhaps, the ice dragons didn’t give much credence to the whole idea of ‘gods’ and praying to these gods in front of a tree. It was not his cup of tea either. But he was not above using that particular facet of the local culture to his advantage so long as it served his goals.

“Lord Harrion.”

Harry turned his head towards the voice that was calling him.

‘That sounded like Marwyn.’ he thought.

He turned back to say his goodbye to Spring but she was nowhere to be found.

‘I really need more training in situational awareness.’ Harry thought, finding his way out of the Godswood that had sprung up all on its own around the lone Heart Tree in his castle, in the wake of the emergence of the Ley line.

Once he came out of the bounds of the Godswood, he found Marwyn and Vayon Poole waiting for him on the other side. Both were sporting grave faces Vayon Poole more so than Marwyn. The two men were standing near the fountain he just installed that was constantly showering clean water

keeping the castle's inhabitants constantly supplied thanks to his magic. He was planning to install more of those in the budding towns and villages cropping up outside his castle walls.

"What? Has something happened?"

"A raven came from Winterfell. I'm afraid there is some disturbing news coming from Dragonstone."

"What disturbing news?" Harry asked.

The answer he got made his eyebrows disappear all the way to his hairline.

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Jon knew something was seriously wrong when he was greeted by none other than Varys the Spider at the docks the moment he disembarked.

"There has been an unfortunate development, Lord Hand." said Varys, a simpering look on his face.

"I gathered as much Lord Varys. Do go on." he said tiredly.

"The fishermen folk have spread the word about the happenings of Dragonstone. Word has spread like wildfire in the city."

"Has there been any untoward reaction?" Jon asked, hoping against hope that the situation was still salvageable.

"The High Septon has gathered all the good fellows, septons and septas to the Sept of Baelor. While the mouthpieces of the Faith claim this is merely a part of the routine spiritual conclave, I'm afraid that's not the case."

"So, the Crown has reasons to be wary of the Faith." Jon said, closing his eyes and cursing the gods for denying him the opportunity to settle this matter quietly.

"I'm afraid so, my lord." said Varys, once they resumed walking out of the dockyard. "There is also another matter."

"Oh, do tell."

"There have been some strange songs coming from the Citadel and Highgarden. It seems Lady Oleanna is aware that Queen Cersei is responsible for the High Septon's sudden hostility against the Starks. And she has also taken a keen interest in the bloodline of House Stark. I'm told she has hired many maesters from the Citadel to look into the Stark bloodline, particularly after the Targaryen civil war."

Jon was now a little bit surprised and worried. If the Tyrells were aware that Cersei was the one behind the High Septon's actions then it'd spell disaster for the current relations between House Stark and House Lannister. It might even strain relations between the North and the Iron Throne for years to come. As for Lady Oleanna's sudden interest in the Stark bloodline was curious.

'I'll have to make some inquiries with the Grand Maester to see whether there is something that'd be of interest for the Tyrells in House Stark's lineage. Perhaps, the Grand Maester could glean some insight from the Citadel.' Jon thought.

“There is also another interesting whisper about Archmaester Marwyn. It seems the good Archmaester has taken residence in the newly built castle of Harrion Stark.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that Lord Varys.” Jon nodded, but he fell on the ground losing his footing as the ground trembled.

Everywhere around him people screamed and ran as the shaking intensified. There was a loud crashing sound and to Jon’s horror, he saw the giant dome of the Sept of Baelor falling down.

“The Sept!”

He didn’t really get the chance to witness what happened next because a lot of people began screaming and running inside the city. Jon was confused and when he looked at Varys he saw the Master of Whispers looking frozen in shock. Following Varys’ line of sight, he was met with a massive wave cresting in the sea.

Jon quickly climbed to his feet and pulled himself over atop one of the horses.

“Varys, come.” he shouted at the Essosi man who thankfully snapped out of his stupor and climbed on the horse.

Jon urged the horse to speed away inside the walls of the city. He rode as fast as he could but the city was descending into chaos. Buildings were falling apart and the confusion along with fear upon seeing the Sept of Baelor tumbling down from Visenya’s Hill set the people to run in all directions. He rode the horse through the tightly packed streets accompanied by his guards until finally stopping at the base of Aegon’s hill. By this time Jon could hear the screams of men, women and children from all around the city.

‘The walls of the city must have held strong before the wave.’ Jon thought, looking at the walls and seeing them standing firm.

But he had no doubt a great disaster has fallen upon the city. The smoke and fires coming from all around the city spoke volumes about the scope of the disaster. It was as if the city has been sacked by an army.

“At least, you won’t have to worry about the Faith come morn my lord Hand.” quipped Varys.

That was said in bad taste and he didn’t like it but Varys did speak the truth. He looked at Visenya’s Hill where the Great Sept once stood with its giant dome and many crystal towers. There was nothing left but a giant cloud of smoke in the wake of the tremors. He doubted the High Septon or even many of the faithful survived the collapse of the Great Sept.

“This was one great disaster we could’ve been without in this situation. The gods remain as cruel as they always have.” Jon muttered, looking at the devastation that was surrounding him.