

Prologue

The wings unfolded wide before the grey sky, sending a plume of snow into the frigid air.

Dragons.

Jon watched the beast intently, noting the movement of its legs, counting its steps. It turned right, lowered its head, closed its black eyes. From its pink gullet came forth a scream, piercing, drowning out the sound of the crashing ocean below.

Daenerys.

The maester touched his ring of black iron, remembering Archmaester Walgrave's lessons. The old man could scarce remember his own name, yet the mysteries of ravencraft still flapped around in his addled head. The language of the white ravens was not something oft revealed to acolytes or novices, but on some days Walgrave mistook Jon for men named Cressen, Walys, or Hother, and then he would whisper away his beloved birds' secrets with a smile and a conspiratorial wink.

The Conclave has met, Jon thought. The young maester brought the bird in from the window and let it stand on a table within the turret. One year, five turns, and twelve days autumn had lasted. Most maesters in the realm believed the gathering of archmaesters to be no more than a review of measurements and figures to settle the changing of the seasons, but Maester Jon knew better. If the meeting were only about astronomy, the greybeards would leave it to Archmaester Vaellyn and his bronze-bedecked followers. *Archmaester Theobald has given orders to his flock.*

Jon had always been suspicious of the Citadel's white ravens, even as a pink-necked novice. The pageantry of heralding a new season with such remarkable, mammoth birds was uncharacteristic of an order that professed humble service. And why use such clever creatures so sparingly? He'd been halfway to his iron link when he discovered the sack of soot in Walgrave's rookery.

It did not surprise Jon that dragons had caught the archmaesters' attention. They had been the talk of Oldtown just before he'd left for the stony bluffs of the Crag. At first he'd believed the stories to be no more than the ramblings of drunken sailors, like the tales of mermaids. It was Alleras, as well-informed as he was well-favored, who assured him these tales were true. *The Sphinx was right. He's always right.* "The dragon queen is coming," he had said, excitement shining through his customary wicked grin. Jon longed desperately to see that glowing face again.

If I can produce the proof they spoke of, he thought, *the Conclave will call me home.* The grey rats who were banished from that great nest added little to the Library's hoard of knowledge, left behind few brilliant works, lived on in no acolytes' memories. A castle maester's sad fate was to receive his lord's pointless letters, deliver his witless whelps, and be quickly forgotten. Jon did not belong at the Crag, let alone Castamere; he had to make the archmaesters see that. He had to finish his work. *They will not leave me scurrying around a ruined castle when I've solved the*

mystery of the seasons, when I can show how and why they change as they do. They will not leave me here to freeze. Warm weather waited for him in Oldtown, warm weather and warm arms.

The young maester was about to prompt the raven to continue when voices began to echo up the turret stair. Jon rose and tossed corn onto the table for the bird before returning to the window. Through the distant fog, Jon could just make out the docks of Cragspoint, where *Bravo* was moored. *That thrice-damned ship.* The sole vessel of Houses Westerling and Spicer had returned from the Jade Sea two days prior, and treasures seemed to pour endlessly from its holds. There were silks of every color, casks of wine and rum and exotic liquors Jon had never heard of, barrels upon barrels of rare and costly spices, chests brimming with ivory and lacquered woods, precious stones like so many great glass eggs.

The maester touched his ring of yellow gold, remembering Archmaester Ryam's lessons. Jon had taken a partial inventory of the goods and reckoned their value. It was no less than a fortune. By his figures, the houses would have more than enough coin to restore Castamere and drain most of its mines. Silver and gold would flow from the earth for generations. *Bravo's* bounty was a blessing from the gods to the impoverished Lords Westerling and Spicer, and a curse to Maester Jon.

Jon's new lord, Ser Rolph Spicer, had been gifted the flooded wreck of Castamere for his service to House Lannister, though no one spoke of just what that service had been. The upjumped knight had insisted the restoration of the castle begin within a moon's turn, with Jon set to supervise the builders. *A maester must go where he is sent,* Jon grumbled to himself. He would spend the winter overseeing the construction of waterwheels and horse capstans for the draining of House Reyne's abandoned mines. Days trudging through mud and ice, nights shivering in a snow-covered tent. Worst of all, he would be a world away from *him*. Jon turned sharply away from the window and its view of the docks. The rippling waves had reminded him of those ink-black curls.

Maester Amory entered the turret with Lord Gawen Westerling's children. It was a tedious bunch. Amory may have been sharp enough when he'd forged his chain thirty years ago, but this chilly rock had dulled the edge off his mind. The maester of the Crag troubled himself with no scholarly pursuits; he would leave behind no writings, no legacy. *Unless you count a bit of scheming against a boy king.* Jon feigned the respect due him as an elder, though. Perhaps the man would confirm his findings, when he had findings to confirm.

"Oh," Amory said abruptly, "I did not expect you here just now." Was that concern or irritation in his voice? The two maesters had been sharing Amory's turret for the past half year, as Jon's rightful tower was at Castamere and had collapsed forty years ago besides. Jon's notes and samples littered the room, no doubt irking the imposed-upon Amory. Left to himself, the Westerling maester would have surely kept his turret as empty as his head. "The guards on the battlements spied the white raven. We have come straight away to see for ourselves."

"Of course," said Jon. With a modest sweep of his arm, he presented the bird eating corn on Amory's table. "Winter has arrived."

“One year, five turns, and ten days autumn has lasted,” declared Maester Amory to Jeyne, Eleyna, and Rollam, who had followed close at his heels to gawk at Oldtown’s pale emissary. He said it with such satisfaction that Jon wondered if his fellow maester had looked forward to this occasion, if he’d somehow spoiled the poor man’s big moment.

“I hope this one talks,” said Rollam. “The last one must have been stupid. It didn’t say anything.”

The last one must have been clever. Silence beats talking to Rollam any day. Jon suppressed a snigger. Lord Westerling’s youngest son was a boy of ten and the presumptive heir to the Crag, ever since his elder brother had gone missing during the Red Wedding. The Knight of Seashells was almost certainly dead, but none would say so within the castle walls for fear Lady Sybell would have them dangling out a tower window. Rollam had little and less in common with his lost brother, from what Jon had heard of the latter. While Raynald had been rebellious and witty, Rollam was serious and dutiful. *Too* dutiful. He’d worshiped first Raynald, then Robb Stark, and now his sister Jeyne. Jon had once admired his own brother with eyes as big and blind as their lord father’s, but by his seventh name day he’d gained the wits enough to stop. The scars enough as well.

“The bird has not spoken,” apologized Jon. *Not in the Common Tongue, at least.*

The white raven *quorked* before returning to its corn.

Eleyna admired the bird. “Is it true that a long summer means an even longer winter? I don’t like the cold.” The simple girl was the most tolerable of the children, as she was the least seen. Her days were oft spent alone, watching the waves crash along the bluffs from a castle window. That solitude would be short-lived: she had recently flowered, so ravens had been coming and going from the rookery this past fortnight, making a din of squawks and marriage offers.

“A summer’s length does influence the bitterness of winter,” Amory agreed, confidently wrong. The old maester only gaped at him when Jon tried to explain the movements of the heavens. How he’d ever earned a bronze link was itself a higher mystery. “But do not fear, child. We have had a good harvest, we shall always have the bounty of the sea, and Ser Duncan has brought us ample wealth with which to supply our wants.” He smiled at the girl with affection. “This winter shall be a kind one if chill air is our most pressing concern.”

“It’s *not*. We should be using that wealth to hire sellswords,” Jeyne said grimly. Lord Gawen’s eldest child made the most exhausting company of the three. The girl had been a widow for well over half a year, but acted as if the Young Wolf had died whilst breaking this morning’s fast. More days than not she would rend her gown, no longer so much in mourning as to provoke her mother, though the castle seamstress was only the one truly riled. “The Freys must pay for their treachery! For what they did to Robb! To Raynald!” She shot Jon an incredulous look. “Don’t *you* agree, at least? You could have lost kin at the Red Wedding yourself.”

It’s a shame I didn’t. Before he took his vows, Maester Jon had been Jon Vance, the fifth and final son of Lord Norbert Vance. The blind Lord of Atranta’s children all looked the same: tall, comely boys with thick brown hair. They shared a vicious nature too, all of them but Jon. Ellery

and Hugo, by a kind of low cunning, had contrived to vent their cruelty on the poor animals they caught on their frequent hunts. Kirth was black-tempered and brutal with a vengeful heart, but left Jon unmolested when unprovoked. It was Ronald who was the real monster in House Vance.

In his eerie fits the young man would roam the corridors of the castle, announcing himself its prince in quest of evil warlocks to vanquish. When Jon was a good evil warlock, he received mere beatings. The scars on his arms and back could attest that he hadn't always been good: he'd fought back too hard, or not hard enough, and this had forced the prince to smite him with his magic sword—Ronald's rusty dirk.

Jon might have died had he not discovered his hiding place. The old storage room had been bricked up long ago, but he had accessed it by removing a stone from the adjacent library. Jon would spend hours there, reading by candlelight, hiding from Prince Ron. When the flame guttered out he would sit in the dark; sometimes he slept, sometimes a new day waited when he emerged. At two-and-ten he had asked his unseeing father to send him to the Citadel. Perhaps one day Kirth's rage would surmount his fear and he'd take revenge on Ronald. Jon hoped so.

"I am a maester of the Citadel, bound in service to Castamere," Jon said mildly in response to the girl's ill-considered treason. "Winter is not the season to start a war, my lady."

"Your *Grace*," snapped the girl. She styled herself a queen dowager, though she'd never so much as seen Winterfell. The Queen in the North. A title as absurd as Princess of Zulamber, the golden-haired dream girl Ronald said he was prophesied to save.

"Your Grace," Maester Jon corrected himself. He bowed his head humbly, but still glimpsed Amory's expression. The Crag's maester had made the same *error* this morning, with the same result. Here the brothers of the order were in silent agreement: it was easier to humor her. *Let Lady Sybell wage that war.*

Jeyne turned away from Jon with a huff and began eyeing Amory's medicine shelves. The old maester had an impressive display, no doubt thanks to Lord Gawen's lady wife. According to Amory, Sybell Spicer's grandmother had been a Qartheen priestess named Xharata Xisina Mexareqa. She was a healer, more or less, a "wise one" to her fellow Qartheen, and had sworn a noble vow to aid the sick. She brought with her from the east a vast collection of potions and ointments—though most of them were for carnal arousal. The smallfolk of the westerlands did not understand what she was and made of her an exotic curiosity: a fortune teller they called Maggy. Offended by Westerosi ignorance, Xharata wove baleful futures to terrify those who sought prophecy within her healing tent. When the crone died, the tent was taken down and the medicines made their way to Amory's turret.

"Rollam," said the boy to the bird, hoping for a response. "*Rollam.*"

The white raven looked up and tilted its head, but said nothing.

"They are trained with food," explained Jon. He would play Amory's part a moment, an indulgent teacher. "Let us see what he can say." He offered a cloaked forearm to the bird. "Here,"

he commanded. Its pale wings spread and flapped as the raven leapt to Jon. The maester took a handful of kernels from the sack and asked, “Corn?”

The great bird beat its wings with fury, slapping Jon hard in the face. Eleyna and Rollam were squealing with laughter; even Jeyne was struggling to keep her face rebelliously sullen. The white raven pecked wildly at Jon’s closed hand, drawing blood. As the maester yelped in pain, the beastly thing jumped back to the table, screaming.

Then it finally spoke. “*Jon!*” it cawed. The raven’s voice was queerly panicked. “*Jon!*” it repeated, “*Jon! Jon! Jon!*” It walked about the table, blood still on its beak.

“It seems to have learned your name,” observed Amory, with only a hint of amusement. “Children, I will need to see to Maester Jon’s wound.”

Still giggling at Jon’s humiliation, the Westerlings filed down the turret stair as Maester Amory lit one candle, then another.

“Not too many,” Jon requested, salvaging his composure. “I’m keeping the turret frigid for my observations. Do you see those chunks of ice near the window?”

Amory looked at the blocks, frowned. “Just ice. What knowledge do you hope to muster from these?”

“They shrink,” Jon said. “Every day, bit by bit. I am recording how quickly they dwindle. They’ve been drying up like puddles.”

“Yes, evaporation,” said Amory. The old man found the bandages. “Every washerwoman who has hung linen in winter knows about that.”

“Just so,” said Jon. “Did you ever wonder why the Wall does not do the same?”

Amory paused, thinking, then said, “Rain and snow add to it, making up for what is lost.”

“Ah, but then it would flatten and grow wider at the bottom.” Jon pointed to one of the ice chunks with his bleeding hand. “See that one? I’ve been drizzling water on it.”

Maester Amory’s mouth opened as if to say something, then shut.

The white raven screamed. “*Jon!*”

The old man sat to look at the cut on Jon’s hand. “When did you get these other wounds?” he asked, frowning at the scars along Jon’s fingertips.

“The night before I said my vows. Half a year ago, or near enough to make no matter.” Most of the scars on Jon’s body were painful memories, but not the ones on his fingers. His face grew warm just thinking of that night. “The Sphinx cleaned and bound my wounds—Alleras—we called him the Sphinx. An acolyte, and brighter than most. Sharpest man I know. Sharpest of wit, I mean.” He couldn’t conceal his grin. The pain in his hand was forgotten.

Amory took his time examining every finger, one by one, then abruptly looked up at Jon with a laugh. “Ha! When you said your vows? I see it now. I cut my thumb on one when I was young, fool that I was, but by the gods, these cuts go deep. What were you thinking? Did you try to pleasure the thing?”

Jon answered only with a sheepish smile. Before an acolyte becomes a maester, he must spend a night sealed in a dark, empty room with a pillar of Valyrian dragonglass, twisted and black. The archmaesters called it a final test, though they meant it as a lesson in humility. No one was expected to succeed.

It had been Alleras who had given him the notion, the business with the candle. The solution was simple, yet elegant. “A circular river,” the handsome acolyte had explained, an idea his mother had heard from a shadowbinder of all people. The copper stars, calamine, and wire had been easy enough to smuggle in the sleeves of his robe. The lemons were more of a challenge. He and the Sphinx had used tree sap to affix three dozen of them to his body, up and down his legs and around his torso.

Jon had read of the maesters’ fruitless attempts to light the glass candles over the centuries: weirwood pyres, dragon blood, wildfire. One maester had even tried to sound a horn borrowed from Claw Isle. In time, the Conclave gave up the pursuit in earnest and consigned the task to acolytes. The glass candles became tokens, symbols of the higher mysteries. Who would guess that lemons were the answer all along?

After fixing the final yellow fruit gingerly to Jon’s chest, Alleras had produced a small piece of cloth from a pocket in his sleeve. Within were several dried mushrooms.

“From the Summer Isles,” he said. “To keep you alert.”

Without question, Jon had placed the fungus in his mouth, chewed, swallowed. The mushrooms had the taste of dirt. They tasted too of apples in autumn, of saffron, of trout fresh from the river. But what Jon remembered best was the taste of the Sphinx’s kiss.

Alleras had been fast, taking Jon by surprise, though the kiss was tender. His lips were gentle, warmer than spring, as soft as feathers, as intoxicating as cider. “Become the candle,” he whispered, looking up at Jon. His eyes were onyx, shining in the light.

The heavy-laden Jon had been fortunate enough to have the wattle-necked, half-blind Archmaester Harodon lock him in the cell for the evening. In the dark, Jon felt at home. He liked the darkness; he was safe in the darkness. As blind as his father in Atranta, Jon unstuck the lemons (wincing with each one) and began connecting them with the wire by feel. As he worked, he peered into the center of the pitch-black room. Into the dragonglass. *Become the candle*. The words of the Sphinx haunted him, as did his kiss.

At some point, he must have fallen asleep. He woke the next morning to the yelp of Archmaester Garizon and the light of an unflickering flame.

Minutes later, Archmaesters Cetheres and Marwyn were questioning the almost-maester. Stone-faced, they listened as Jon giddily explained the copper stars, the calamine, the lemons. He

did not say a word of Alleras. Afterward, Marwyn took the glass candle to his chambers to determine just what had occurred.

Jon had been sure his feat would impress the Conclave, earn him a Valyrian steel link, make him the toast of the Citadel. Instead, shortly after his vows were spoken and his fingers treated, he found himself aboard the fat-bellied *Myraham*, bound for the Crag. He'd been forbidden from even speaking of dragonglass. He felt bitterness at first, betrayed and abandoned by the old men who'd been fathers to him—as Lord Norbert had not.

But one night aboard the vessel, sleepless from the squalling of the captain's daughter's babe and contemplating the vast blackness of the Sunset Sea, he'd puzzled out the reason for his dismissal. Though now a maester of the Citadel, he *was* still the son of Lord Norbert, and Lord Norbert had fought for the Young Wolf. His father had been pardoned, but forgiven is not forgotten. With Jon in the hands of a Westerling or a Spicer, House Vance would not dare break the king's peace. In truth, however, the blind lord was near death, and his heir, the Prince of Atranta, would relish Jon's execution. His bitterness turned to utter frustration at the pointlessness of his own banishment.

"*Jon!*" the white raven cried again, nipping at a drop of Jon's blood upon the table.

Amory shook his head. "You should not have taught it your name."

"I didn't," Jon protested. "It arrived just before you—"

"*Beware!*" the raven warned.

That got Amory's attention. He looked up from the bandaging. "Do you suppose it is a message from the Citadel? What perils could it be speaking of?"

Jon thought of the dragon queen, but said, "Could it be the ironmen?"

"They harry far south of here. Feastfires would have warned us if they ventured into westerland waters, or Banefort if they came from the north."

"*Bravo?*"

"What danger is saffron?" mused the old maester. "I admit, when I visited the ship there were some unsavory sorts about—brutish sailors, refugees from Astapor, three pale Qartheen—but they are all being kept in Cragspart."

"The mines?"

"The mines? Ah, I see what you have done," Amory chuckled. "A clever ruse. Castamere shall be a hardship these first few years, I know, but your fate could be much harder. They say the Wall is in need of maesters. You could look into this matter of the ice first hand. Would that make you any happier?"

"I promise you, the bird is not mimicking me."

Amory finished with the bandage, a competent wrap. “Lord Rolph wished to know whether you had reviewed his plans for these frightening mines of yours.” A note of accusation had entered his voice.

“I did, but he will not be happy. I am certain the northwest shaft will not drain,” Jon said, rising to check his sample of quicksilver in the corner of the turret. The liquid metal rested a tad lower in the glass tube today, further proof that the Myrish thinkers had the right of it.

“This again?” The maester of the Crag wrinkled his brow. “The air will hold the water down? Nonsense. *Nothing* cannot hold down *something*. He will have you at that mine day and night until it is dry, you know.”

Jon sighed. Had Amory supported his claim that air had weight, Lord Rolph might have listened. Instead he had made Jon look a fool. He knew he must speak with his lord before this vain enterprise went any further.

The young maester descended the turret stair to seek out the Lord of Castamere. Rolph Spicer would be in either Lord Gawen’s solar or Seashell Hall. Walking through the castle corridors, Jon passed a dozen arched windows, each with an arresting view of the Sunset Sea: the dusky waves were framed by dark cliffs rising north into grey mist. In better times, the arches had held six marble clamshells each; now every third arch held but one. The windows’ ornate keystones had all been replaced by simple stones or bricks, and many of those looked ready to fall out.

The maester touched his ring of copper, remembering Archmaester Perestan’s lessons. The Crag was ancient, the seat of House Westerling dating back to the Age of Heroes. Its lands were full of gold and tin, so the house had been wealthy for thousands of years. Westerlings often married the Kings of the Rock; young Jeyne’s namesake had been taken to wife by Maegor the Cruel. There were disputes amongst historians as to when the mines had been exhausted, however, with some claiming that House Westerling’s decline began hundreds of years ago. Regardless, the ruin of the Crag was what remained of the house’s past glory, along with empty caves and barren tunnels.

According to the songs, the children of the forest had lived in those lonely caves before the Westerlings drove them out and uprooted their weirwoods. Jon had never seen one of the white trees—not a living one, at least. The Andals had burned the ones in Atranta thousands of years ago, but the study of weirwood had always fascinated Jon, for the old trees told old tales. At the Citadel, a slice of a great weirwood trunk could be found in the western garden; brought south from beyond the Wall, the piece measured fifty feet across, ten times wider than any tree Jon had seen standing. The archmaesters said it had been more than five thousand years old when it was cut down. Perhaps it was the oldest thing that ever lived, the oldest thing that ever died.

At some point, every novice would try to count the tree’s rings, each one representing an ancient, long-forgotten summer. The wider the distance between rings, the longer the summer—it was the best record of the seasons in Westeros, older than the writings of maesters, more ancient than the scriblings of septons. The weirwood’s most important testimony was the pattern of its rings:

there was none. It was as if the gods cast the seasons at random. *A riddle*, Jon thought, thinking of those deep, dark eyes. *I will find its answer.*

Named for the mother-of-pearl tiles lining both the walls and the vaulted ceiling, Seashell Hall had once been a wonder. As the years passed, pieces fell, but were not replaced; the seashells that remained had become a starry indoor sky, still beautiful, but full of twinkling melancholy. At the head of the hall hung a faded tapestry, spotted with mold, depicting Jaehaerys and Vermithor's sojourn at the Crag. For two centuries since, no king had felt the need to visit the castle until its storming by the Young Wolf. Six great tables in the shape of clams filled the room. At the centermost sat the Lord and Lady Westerling opposite Lord Spicer and the captain of *Bravo*, Ser Duncan Spicer.

"Maester Jon!" Lord Rolph clapped his hands together as Jon entered, his tone mocking. "How fare your measurements? I do hope you are not so distracted that you have forgotten about my mines? Not a moon's turn past, he was digging up dirt in caves. Now he plays with ice and quicksilver."

How can I convince a man who disdains knowledge itself? Jon took a deep breath. "The quicksilver relates to the mines, my lord. Like the water beneath the earth—"

"What is of interest in the caves?" interrupted Lord Gawen. "Searching for dragonglass arrowheads? My grandfather gifted me with one he found in his youth. I always wondered which dragon's breath forged the thing."

Jon suppressed a wince at the ignorant intrusion. The Lord of the Crag had meandered from the point at hand, as oft he did, but Jon was obliged to follow his lead. "I was seeing what metals the early Westerlings once mined, my lord," he said. "Most were copper and tin, as might be expected, but in one of the early caves the first Westerlings dug iron ore."

"Iron?" Gawen scratched his beard. "So long ago? Are you certain? Makes you wonder where the ironborn got their name, anyway."

"I am less concerned with yesterday's ironmen than I am with today's," put in Lady Sybell. Lord Gawen's wife was an imposing woman, sly and shrewd. She would have had the makings of a maester, had she been born a man. "My cousin's return was an impressive feat with their longships swarming the seas, but we cannot take such risks with them in future."

"How did it come to be that *Bravo* was so fortunate?" inquired Jon of her captain, taking his lady's hint. Let the man sing his success to another set of ears.

"Once we approached the Arbor, we avoided the straits and kept well out of sight of land," said Ser Duncan. The cousin of Lord Rolph and Lady Sybell looked more pirate than knight with his tanned, weathered face. He had spent much of his life sailing amongst the ports of the Free Cities and even farther east. "We were alerted to the danger when we took on fresh water in Tall Trees Town. Some ironborn had moored there after weathering storms. They boasted that their new king would give them Oldtown, the Arbor, and all of Westeros after his brother returned with the queen and her dragons."

“Dragons?” asked Lord Gawen. “Surely that was a jape.”

“I saw them with mine own eyes—in Qarth, before we passed into the Jade Sea,” said the captain grimly. “They were little things, as was their mother, Daenerys Targaryen. The dragons must have grown, though. By the time we returned to the Summer Sea, she had crowned herself Queen of Meereen. I took on some Astapori passengers on New Ghis: they spoke of burnings, and the slaying of children as young as twelve. Some sailors told other tales about the queen and horses ... but those are best left unsaid in my lady’s presence.”

It seemed little and less would be said at this meeting on the properties of air and water, either. Jon would not convince his lord of anything here and now, he knew. *When I am summoned back to Oldtown, it will make no matter what Rolph Spicer thinks. Oldtown ...* Jon thought uneasily of the white raven and its warnings. *Is the Citadel in danger from the ironmen and this dragon queen both?*

“However she may have taken Meereen, I bid her joy of it,” said Lady Sybell. “That city lies a world away; the ironborn are close and vexing. But ravens’ wings bring us good tidings: Lord Terrence Kenning seeks the honor of our Eleyna’s hand. We have accepted. The Kennings of Harlaw and the Kennings of Kayce remain close, despite their difference in liege lords ... or liege kings, as it may be. Lord Terrence assures us that he can keep the Crag free from ironborn raids, as he has kept his own seat.”

Jon doubted that Lord Kenning truly wished to marry the younger Westerling daughter. The old lord of Kayce had shunned marriage for three decades and treated his nephew as his heir, even bestowing upon him the family horn. No, the betrothal reeked of lions, though he wondered why Eleyna was to be wed and not the elder daughter Jeyne.

“The Crag’s not the only thing needs protection,” said Ser Duncan uncertainly. “The Guild demanded that we provide safe passage across the Sunset Sea to their trading galleys. I accepted the term in exchange for their prices on saffron, cinnamon, and cloves. At the time it was a bargain. Now ...”

Lord Gawen blinked at his good-cousin. “And how are we to provide such protection from the Crow’s Eye? Lord Mallister told us stories of that one, he did.” Gawen had spent a year as a prisoner at Seagard, though he’d been freed from the dungeon when he became the father of a queen. After that, he’d seemingly endured dinners with Jason Mallister, dwelling endlessly on his house’s ancient feud with the iron kings, their grievous crimes, his thirst for vengeance.

Lord Rolph waved his hand dismissively. “We are speaking of problems well beyond the horizon. From what I hear, the Redwynes will deal with the ironmen in good time.”

“And if they don’t, the soil of the Iron Islands will still be thin, their summers cool, their autumns wet,” Lady Sybell hinted. “They will need to trade their plunder for grain. Who better than with us and our new Kenning kin? Then we could set the safe passage of these galleys from Qarth as one of *our* terms, and we would have the only reliable eastern trade along the coast.”

Why would ironmen trade for what they can take by force? Jon wondered, but kept his own counsel.

“Our grandfather was a member of the Ancient Guild of Spicers,” added Lord Rolph, turning back to the captain. “Whatever should arise, I am sure our Qartheen friends will remain amiable.”

Ser Duncan looked dubious. “The Guild remains amiable just as long as it puts coin in their pockets. Gulltown and Oldtown demand steep duties, it’s true, and Cragstown could provide a friendlier port to trade for gold and seek riches from beyond the Wall ... but only if Qartheen ships can sail safe waters getting here.”

“Beyond the Wall?” scoffed Lord Gawen. “What do they mean to trade? Snow?”

Skins, Jon thought, *slaves*. When Daenerys freed the chattel of Slaver’s Bay, she made the slave cities look elsewhere for their labor, and the route to the Frozen Shore was free of the Braavosi who might seize slavers in the Narrow Sea. *What do you call a line of “free folk” chained in a Qartheen coffle?*

“Then our course is set,” Lady Sybell decided, ignoring her husband’s question. “We have mines to drain, docks to expand and a wedding to plan. In a moon’s turn, we ride to Kayce.”

“Save you, Maester Jon,” Lord Rolph added with a derisive smile. “You will travel south with us only as far as Castamere. Your *real* work begins then.”

My real work must be finished by then, Jon resolved, thinking of his last unwelcome journey. The night before the *Myraham* set sail, the novices and acolytes had sent Jon off with drinks at the Quill and Tankard. Mollander was well in his cups and mourning his father, still unable to appreciate his new freedom. Haughty Armen and husky Robert fervently debated something neither of them understood. Pate, ever gullible, chatted with the mummer girl who claimed she still had her maidenhead. Even Lazy Leo was there, staring at Jon from across the common room with a sneer.

His bandaged hands could barely hold the third tankard of cider Alleras bought him. “Here you are, *Maester* Jon,” he said, sly teasing beneath the deference in his address. *The gods are cruel*, Jon thought, gazing at the sloe-eyed Sphinx. Would he ever see those eyes again?

“Perhaps ...” Jon said, his words as clumsy as his hands, “... you will be sent to the westerlands ... too ... when your chain is forged.”

The acolyte already had two links—was on the verge of his third. Within three years, surely, the man would make a maester. But Alleras only smiled softly. “I am not here in Oldtown to try my learning against the archmaesters’ knowledge. Or to try my longbow against Mollander’s apples.” The smile became a grin. “From *here* I will set my own trial.”

Jon did not understand, but something in the way Alleras spoke told Jon his words were true. *He’s always right*. No one would pack Alleras off on a ship, to the westerlands or anywhere else.

He would remain at the Citadel until he had completed his purpose, whatever that purpose was. Jon's heart sank, but he tried to return the acolyte's kind look. "Your trial?"

Alleras sipped his sweet wine. "A riddle for you. Suppose the animals of the world were to choose themselves a leader. A King of Beasts. How to decide which is fit to rule? The sheep would set a test to see who could produce the most wool. The snakes, a test to make the strongest venom." He took another sip. "The lions would test sharp claws and teeth, and hawks, the ability to fly. Each would choose a test according to their own powers. So, tell me Maester Jon, how can they all settle on a king?"

Jon pondered the question as he emptied his tankard, but he came to no good answer. *Was he speaking of a sphinx?* "Take a bit of this and a bit of that?" he guessed.

Alleras only smirked.

When they rose, Jon had to rest his bandaged hand on the acolyte's shoulder so as not to fall. The men crossed the old plank bridge into the mists of night.

They walked a long time, their final night together, through that maze of a city, through its wynds and alleys and crookback streets. They passed through the Blue Gate and over the muddy stone of the Flower Bazaar. When they finally stopped, they were in a narrow back street cloaked in shadow.

Alleras kissed him now for the second time, though now passion took the place of tenderness. Jon kissed back, and the alley spun around them. The Sphinx sucked the lobe of his ear, bit at his neck; his hand slipped under Jon's new robe.

"Oh," was all he could say. His bandaged hand fumbled at Alleras's cloak. The cobblestones were melting away beneath his feet. Then he melted with them.

Jon searched for Alleras in the morning, but he was nowhere to be found. Feeling numb, he boarded his ship for the Crag, then watched the domes and towers of the Citadel grow smaller as he sailed off into the distance.

Since then he'd dreamed of nothing but the Sphinx.

When Lord Rolph dismissed him from Seashell Hall, Jon wandered back across the castle and up to the turret. Amory had brought a large cage down from the rookery for the white raven, which slept quietly inside. The old maester had also tidied up Jon's papers, leaving the room feeling empty, lonely. Jon opened the window, letting the cold in. The clouds breaking over the western sea let the sunset cast the room in a ruddy glow. The young maester sat until the sun fell behind the horizon.

The room darkened. *Solve the seasons, Jon. Solve them or watch them play across this sky, this land, till your last winter.*

In the gloom, the young maester found Amory's lens tube, its tripod standing in the corner. The stars would be visible tonight, the moon full. He gathered his star charts and figures, an inkpot and quill. His arms full, he walked up the stairs.

Passing through the dim rookery as he climbed the tower, Jon could just make out the black wings within. The air along the battlements was more than bracing, but it was the best place to view the night sky. Jon set the tube on the tripod and directed it toward the glowing shroud in the distance. Then he waited, watching for a gap in the clouds.

The maester touched his ring of bronze, remembering Archmaester Vaellyn's lessons. When the moon was full, you could see on its face both Lyman's crater and the Lefthand crater. A line between the two blemishes was a horizon of sorts: almost—but not quite—parallel to the earth. The extent of that error varied. Through the Myrish lens, Jon could see the difference: Lyman was a quarter-degree raised from when he'd first arrived at the Crag. Vinegar Vaellyn called this curiosity "the wobble."

The archmaesters couldn't agree on what, exactly, was wobbling. Most took it to be the moon that shook, though there were some who held it was the earth that tottered instead. The septons were wont to blame the gaze of man, made crooked by his sin. Jon had spent countless hours measuring the wobble against the movement of the seven wanderers and the rings of the great tree. He'd even considered the coming of the comet and the Doom of Valyria. There was no pattern.

If that's true, then I am doomed. A life of messages and medicines, of water that never drains. A whole life here.

Alone.

He stepped back from the tube and looked up at the stars with naked eyes, thinking of all he did not know. He thought of lemons and a great river flowing into itself, of iron older than writing, dragonglass forged beneath the earth and pushed somehow to its surface. He thought of a weirwood sapling growing to a hulking tree over thousands of years, a Wall unchanged beside it, seasons turning and turning above. He felt the weight of the air upon his head, the wobble of the earth beneath his feet, the touch of a kiss upon his lips.

The cold crept into his bones.

Shivering beneath the moon and stars, an idea came to him.

Jon's eyes widened. Leaving the lens tube on its tripod, he gathered up his papers and raced down the stairs. A hundred black wings flapped in fury as the maester pounded through the rookery. "Corn!" they screamed. "Corn, corn, corn!"

In the turret, Jon lit a candle, took up quill and ink, and rolled out fresh parchment. The words flowed from his fingers like blood upon dragonglass.

When he had finished, he looked back over his words, marveling at them. But which archmaester would deign to consider his notion? *Theobald? Norren? Willifer?*

He rolled up the letter and sealed it with a glob of the Crag's sand-colored wax. Mixed into the wax was real sand, which sparkled in the candlelight. Without, he wrote a name: *Archmaester Marwyn*.

They might well send me to the Wall, Jon thought, grinning foolishly. The Shadow Tower was better than Castamere, though. There was hope at the Wall, a chance to uncover the truth of the world. Perhaps he would see a weirwood. *First the Wall. Then home.*

Maester Jon climbed back to the rookery, attached his letter to an Oldtown raven, stroked its feathers for a moment, and unleashed it into the sky. He envied the bird as it flew out of sight.

Afterward, he carefully returned Maester Amory's lens tube and tripod, put away the ink and wax, and organized his papers until the turret was as orderly as he had found it. As he closed the window, he looked out to where the moon now lay in the sky. It was the hour of ghosts, not too late to find Lord Rolph and tell him of what he'd discovered. Whether his lord would believe him or not, he could not sleep with such a secret.

"*Beware!*" the white raven called, awake again. On the morrow, he would see what other messages the bird had for him.

Jon descended the stair and crossed the castle once again, this time heading for Lord Gawen's solar. It was the most pleasant room in the Crag, having been maintained as the rest of the castle decayed around it. During Gawen's imprisonment at Seagard, Lord Rolph had served as castellan and spent his evenings there, reading by the light of a fire. When the Lord of the Crag returned, he felt it rude to deprive his good-brother of the room's luxury, knowing the cold ruin of Castamere awaited him soon enough. The lords and lady would be there, Jon knew.

Oddly, there was no guard outside. Something was wrong. *Beware!* Suddenly cautious, the maester approached the door, eased it open. He peered into the solar, heart pounding.

No.

No. No. No!

The maester touched his ring of silver, remembering Archmaester Ebrose's lessons. Maester Jon dropped to the ground and pressed his ear to Lord Rolph's breast. *No heartbeat*. Three fallen bodies and not a drop of blood. *They have no wounds*. It was poison, he was certain. But which poison? He needed to act with all haste if he was to serve them an antidote. His eyes raced around the room—he saw no cup for drink, no plate for food. *Not nightshade, not greycap, not tears of Lys*. Rolph Spicer's skin was a mottled blue-green, his mouth clear of foam. *Not the strangler, not wolfsbane, not demon's dance*.

That left only ... *manticore venom*. The toxin killed the instant it reached the heart.

Jon sat up, defeated.

Lord Rolph was dead. Lord and Lady Westerling as well.

Jon made to call for the guards, then hesitated. *Two dead lords and a Vance. They will suspect me.* Neither he nor Amory kept any manticores venom, but could the guards be sure of that? What if the old man didn't recognize the poison? Even if he kept his freedom, Jon's lord had died. He remembered the sniggers in Oldtown when the Grand Maester failed to save King Joffrey. It had been an impossible task, but Pycelle was labeled senile regardless. Jon thought of his work, of the letter he had loosed to Oldtown. *The Conclave will dismiss it, all of it, the desperate ravings of a panicked boy.*

He had to explain to them. He had to—then it dawned on him. *The Lord of Castamere is dead, and the Lord of the Crag too.* The lands and incomes of both would fall to Rollam, a boy—a boy who already had a maester. There was no more need of Jon in the westerlands. Disgraced though he may be, Jon would return to Oldtown.

He was going home.

Jon was thinking of Alleras when he felt the sting at his ankle.

He looked behind him and saw something green and glittering scurry across the floor.

There, behind the door, stood a cloaked man, pale of skin.

"I am so sorry," he whispered.