

“You must be joking for sure.” Paxter Redwyne said with a snort.

Petyr wholeheartedly agreed with the feelings expressed by the Master of Ships. He hated the man with a passion for being a meticulous administrator, making it difficult for him to smuggle certain goods in or out of the city. But that doesn't mean he had to disagree with everything the man said.

“I'm afraid I'm not as adept at making jokes as you think I am, Lord Redwyne.” Jon Arryn said, looking composed while staring at each face in the Small Council to show that he was serious.

“But...but...this is preposterous. To cut a long canal along the Neck connecting the Narrow Sea with the Sunset Sea is simply...” Grand Maester Gormon said while shaking his head. “It's impossible.”

“As impossible as making ships that fly and castles from mud on a single night?” Varys asked blandly.

Baelish looked thoughtful at the question and realised the Master of Whispers was right.

He admonished himself for his severe lack of judgment by ignoring the magical prowess of Cat's son. In his defence, it was difficult to keep track of the Stark boy's magical accomplishments and keep them in mind in meetings like these. He was only familiar with playing the Game against regular players on an even field, not against a sorcerer of unimaginable powers. This left him wholly blindsided whenever the Stark boy was involved.

Petyr struggled to think of an appropriate response to the news Jon Arryn had shared with the Small Council. A canal cut straight through the neck built by the Starks was one of the worst news he had heard in the last decade. If it becomes a reality, he could see the entire shipping from Braavos, Pentos, and maybe even Myr diverted to the canal.

Not only would this enrich the North, but it'd also give them control over the flow of trade into Oldtown, Lannisport and the Arbour. There were also other locations along the western coasts that he excluded, especially in the Riverlands and the North. By controlling the canal, the North would control all trade between the Narrow Sea and the Sunset Sea. The political power amassed from such control would make the Starks far more powerful than they already were.

On the other hand, Petyr was not so blinded by his dislike of House Stark that he ignored the obvious advantages of having a canal so close to his lands in the Fingers. While his landholdings were not particularly substantial or resource-rich, he could think of a few ways to enrich his lands from the benefit of shifting trade with the advent of a canal. He could build a port and have it serve as a supply station for ships from the southern Free Cities of Essos.

But this also meant all his efforts to help the Myrish pirates settle in the Three Sisters were wasted and detrimental to his renewed interest in the region.

On one hand, he didn't want the North to gain more power; on the other, he was attracted by the lucrative opportunity to develop his lands. With his connections among the merchants in Westeros and abroad, it'd be

'No. The North should not be allowed to have the canal. They're already far too powerful.' Petyr thought grimly. 'I cannot get distracted by the possibility of making more gold.'

"Does Lord Stark say how long it'll take them to build this canal?" Petyr asked curiously.

"No, he does not." Jon Arryn shook his head.

"A canal in the North should allow ships from Braavos and Pentos access to the Sunset Sea circumventing the Stepstones. The pirates would be out of their business if such a canal comes into existence." said Lord Redwyne.

"The pirates might extend their reach northward, coming into direct conflict with the royal fleet if ships avoid the Stepstones." Patrice Oakheart said, the newly sworn Master of Laws.

"Is that possible?" Stannis suddenly asked, looking at Lord Redwyne.

One other thing Petyr was worried about was King Stannis. Unlike King Robert, Stannis Baratheon never missed a single Small Council meeting. The man was an able king and held court at least two days a week. A competent king on the Iron Throne was making his life very difficult in King's Landing, and a Stark boy with magical powers was making his revenge farther and farther away. An immense helpless feeling swelled up inside him, threatening to pull him into despair.

"It could be possible. Pirates are not exactly smart folk. They'll look to loot ships one way or the other." said Lord Paxter.

"Then we'll have to prepare for such an eventuality. We don't know when Lord Stark plans the construction. But we must be prepared for all eventualities." said Stannis.

"Your grace. Have you perhaps given a thought about the necessity of this canal?" Petyr slyly asked before anyone else could say anything.

"What do you mean, Lord Baelish?" Stannis asked, frowning at the Master of Coin.

"We have no pressing problems that require a canal to be built across the Neck. Also, shouldn't your grace have a say in this grand construction?" Petyr asked.

"If the lords of Westeros think they should start asking permission for anything they build on their lands using their gold and silver, then my office will be filled with such requests. So long as the Starks are building their canal in their lands and there are no complaints from other lords whose lands this canal passes, I see no reason for my involvement. They are free to do whatever they want with their lands so long as they're not breaking any laws." said Stannis, after which he stared at the new Master of Laws.

"To my knowledge, there are no laws that'd prohibit Lord Stark from building something in his lands." said Patrice Oakheart.

“Lord Stark also informed us all beforehand courteously through Lord Arryn.” Varys quipped, eyeing Petyr with a sly smile.

“We should be focusing our efforts on how this canal would impact our trade and perhaps how that’ll be received in Dorne.” said Jon Arryn. “Also, we need to contact Lord Eddard and ensure our enemies or pirates cannot access the canal.”

To Petyr’s frustration, once again, his subtle attempts to stonewall House Stark lay in tatters. Instead, he’d have to hope that some hapless, no-good rivals of House Stark in Essos would do something. It was for the umpteenth time he was questioning the supposed prowess of assassins in Essos. So far, the Essosi rivals of Harrion Stark have stopped sending assassins, or they’ve stopped wasting their silver and resigned themselves to the existence of their rival. He could see no other reason why the wealthy Essosi magisters were failing to have the troublesome Stark boy killed.

‘Incompetent fools.’ Petyr thought with a scowl.

Nonetheless, he decided to have the news of the canal’s construction leaked to the enemies of House Stark. If someone got lucky and managed to hinder the canal somehow, then he’d count that as a win. It was a fool’s hope, but he had nothing else in the arsenal to hurt the Starks. Petyr had to accept the grim reality that his foes in the North were far too powerful and untouchable by normal means.

‘If only I had a mountain of gold, I could’ve enlisted the services of a Facelessman.’

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Jon could only stare in awe at the snowy hill upon which the ice dragon was lounging candidly. To think he thought he had seen all the wonders of magic that had to offer from his brother. Once again, the world magic kept surprising him at every turn.

The dragon had beautiful blue scales resembling finely cut crystals while gleaming like an ethereal giant blue gemstone. When Harry described the dragon, he was not mincing words.

‘This has to be the most beautiful creature in the world.’ Jon thought, mesmerised by the dragon.

“She does not like to eat meat. She prefers leaves, especially from Weirwood trees. And she can’t breathe fire, but she breathes ice that can kill any living creature in the blink of an eye like dragonfire.” Harry explained.

“She only eats leaves?” Jon asked to make sure his ears had not betrayed him.

“Yes. She does not eat meat.” Harrion answered.

Jon could only feel more wonder and give up trying to understand the ways of magic.

“Have you managed to bond with her?” Jon asked curiously.

“Dragons are not pets, Jon. I thought you’d have realised that by now after spending time with Snuggles.”

“I understand that, but still...” Jon looked expectantly at Harry.

“I’ve not flown on Winter, and no, there is no ‘bond’ between us.” said Harry.

“That’s a shame. I think Sundancer can understand some of my wishes if I express them with more emotion.”

“I don’t know why you changed the name of the dragon. Snuggles was a perfect name for it.” Harry argued.

“Are you kidding?” Jon asked incredulously. “He hated that name with a passion. Whenever I used that name, he spat fire at my face.”

“You should’ve seen when he was young. He was such a cute dragon, and I gave him the cutest name possible.” Harry said with a pained look.

Jon shook his head; he could never have imagined Sundancer as cute. He was a fierce dragon who loved fighting, hunting, and killing. There was simply nothing else Sundancer found interesting. He had seen Sundancer watch an antelope bleed to death with rapt attention before consuming it whole. He wondered whether other Targaryen dragons of the past exhibited such strange character traits.

“We should leave. Even though Winter is not hostile to our presence, I get the feeling we stepped in during her nap time.” said Harry.

Once they stepped out of the trunk, Jon found a chair and sat down.

“What did the Sealord say?” Jon asked.

“Nothing much. Robb informed the Sealord about the Canal and our intentions to form a trade pact with Braavos. The Sealord asked for a few days to discuss the matter with his advisors.”

“Will they agree?” Jon asked with a frown.

“Not without knowing whether they can secure lower port duties and tolls from us. They’ll also need to know whether we have a tight leash over the Ironborn.”

“What about the Sistermen?” Jon asked.

“What about them?” Harry raised an eyebrow.

“I thought the Sealord would be more concerned with the pirates working from the Three Sisters.” Jon said confusedly.

“That’s because Braavos has been fighting pirates for centuries, but they’ve never fought the Ironborn. A wise general will be more concerned with the foe they don’t know than the one they know.” said Harry.

Jon supposed the Braavosi would learn everything they needed about the Ironborn once the canal opened. Or maybe the Northern fleet could wreak havoc on the Ironborn ships.

Who knows what the future holds, Jon thought.

“Let’s go get some sleep. Tomorrow, we have many places to visit in the city.” said Harry.

The following day, Jon walked with Harrion, Robb, Elsera, Josera and Anya towards the harbour under an armed escort. All three of them carried daggers on their person in case of an emergency. Not that he ever thought there would be any situation that’d call for the use of their weapons when they had Harry with them. Besides, the entire idea was Ser Hallis Mollen’s.

Jon looked back at the mansion’s gates, where people from all walks of life came to see the flying ships. Because of the swarm of people covering the mansion’s walls, they had to take a secret tunnel to walk outside the boundaries without notice. People from across the city’s many islands were pouring into the island to see the ship. Some came hoping to see a dragon because some people were under the impression there was a Northern dragon in the city. At the same time, some others hoped to see whether the flying ship had wings. There were even some who came to see the Sorcerer of the North.

Now, that was an interesting name the Braavosi had for his brother. Jon supposed they only knew about Harry’s magic and not the others with similar powers in Avalon.

‘Maybe even more terrifying powers.’ Jon thought, staring at the back of Elsera’s head.

Out of all of Harry’s students, Elsera Snow’s powers were the most terrifying. She could create anything out of her own blood. Under Harry’s tutelage, that power had only increased several folds, allowing her to make magical constructs without the aid of her blood. She could also use spells like Harry while her brother was a powerful warg. He had not heard much about House Forrester from Old Nan. But he supposed they must’ve had ancestors with powerful magic like House Stark.

While ‘The North remembers’ was a popular saying back home, Jon thought they had forgotten quite a lot. If not for his brother, the North would’ve never rediscovered the wonders of magic. And perhaps, there was still a lot to find not just in the North but across the world.

They passed by some remote parts of the harbour where barges of firewood were being rowed in by people. Men and women hung around the edges of the canal with fishing poles in their hands. Snake boats passed through thin channels carrying flowers and other merchants’ wares. There was a hint of a fog hanging here and there in the city. There was a rosy tint of a smell hung loosely in the air that Jon found pleasant.

He flinched, however, when the Titan roared. The sound was faint, but he heard it nonetheless. When he looked around, he saw that the people of the city were hardly bothered by the roar of the Titan.

The Braavosi guides they had led them towards a couple of snake boats in the harbour. Jon looked uneasily at Robb, who was afraid to get into the boat. But they had no choice but to follow through as their insistence on visiting the Titan got them here.

“I like these boats. Maybe we should build a few of these and have a boat race in the White Knife every year.” Harrion said with a smile.

Jon held on to Robb for dear life as their boat wobbled dangerously whenever anyone moved so much as an inch.

“I hope he is joking.” Robb muttered.

“Knowing Harry, I’m afraid he might be entirely serious.” Jon muttered back.

“These snake boats are sleek and fast. Perfect for races. Having men compete in snake boat races might also deliver some competent oarsmen in the fleet.” Harry thought aloud.

‘Told you.’ Jon mouthed to Robb.

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The Titan of Braavos was not just a stone sculpture that shouted out the architectural ingenuity of Braavosi sculptors and stonemasons. It also acted as a lighthouse and fortress. Some of its chambers were open to the wealthy for parties and other recreational activities. Jon had no idea how much silver Harry had to spend for the entrance, but he assumed it was quite a sum.

Their boats reached the island where one of the massive legs of the Titan was fixed on a mountain of black granite. Soldiers lined the steep ridges of the island, keeping their diligent watch over the waters surrounding the island. Soldier pines lined most parts of the island in dull green reminiscent of those in the North with their broadleaves in russet and gold, signs of the advent of autumn.

Jon was expecting a long flight of stairs to the top of the statue, but he was surprised to find a gilded cage of bronze worked by a winch at the foot of the Titan to take them above. He kept an ear out for the Braavosi guides as they explained the history of the Titan. He knew some of the stories thanks to Old Nan. The Titan first roared during the Uncloaking of Braavos. Since then, a ten-day festival of masks and revelry has been held in the city to celebrate the Uncloaking. At midnight on the tenth day, the Titan would roar, and the citizens were required to remove their masks to signify the uncloaking of the Secret City.

The guides continued to regale them with the tale of how the escaped slaves of Valyria commandeered ships from their masters and built a city far away from the sights of the dragonlords. He suspected it was an attempt to take their minds off the fact that they were not hundreds of feet above the island. Gales of wind swept by as the bronze cage climbed all the way to the waistline of the colossal statue.

Suddenly, the cage stopped moving, coming to a stop above the waist of the statue. The cage suddenly started to move towards the statue, employing several pulleys. A door suddenly opened on the statue right as the cage neared the statue’s bronze midsection.

“Please follow us.”

The guides stepped off the cage into the door after opening the gates.

Jon was mystified once he stepped into the interior of the statue. There was an expansive chamber inside the statue with a gleaming white marble floor and several gigantic stone pillars. There was so much to see inside the many halls and chambers. They were filled with murals, stone sculptures, carcasses and tusks of Norvosi elephants and many other great works. There was an entire chamber dedicated to peacocks from the Summer Islands. Those majestic creatures would dance when there was rainfall, which was one of the major attractions, according to the guides.

The roar of the Titan came out of nowhere, making Jon flinch. This time, he felt a tangible sense of magical energy touching his senses. Unlike last time, he could feel his senses expand and his blood calling out to the source of the sound.

"I felt it as well." Elsera whispered from beside Jon.

"What do you think it is?" Jon asked after overcoming his surprise over the fact that Elsera was speaking to him.

"I don't know. There are tales about a Horn of Winter used by Joramun, a king-beyond-the-wall, and woke the Giants from their slumber."

"You think the Titan hosts the Horn of Winter?" Jon asked incredulously.

"Of course not. But it must be something similar." Elsera said.

Jon nodded thoughtfully, seeing the merit in her argument.

'I suppose it'll become clear tonight.' Jon thought.

He eyed Harrion, who nodded at him, confirming their private trip to the head of the Titan would go ahead as planned.