Say You'll Remember Me

by RoseAlenko

Summary

Instead of stopping in the Dothraki Sea, Drogon carries an injured Dany far, far away from the chaos of the fighting pits, across the Narrow Sea and into the path of a certain, brooding Lord Commander.

(Check out the fan art added in chapters 2 and 9!)

Notes

Hi guys! This will be my first multi-chapter Game of Thrones fic. I'm nervous and excited to share it with all of you. This is, obviously, an AU that diverges from canon somewhere around episode 5.09 of the show, and near the end of ADWD in ASOIAF.

This first chapter does recycle some events and dialogue from 5.09 (only because I really enjoy Tyrion's lines in these scenes ^.^) but from here on out, since it's an AU, it will be an original plot.

This is not one of those epic, multi-chapter GoT/ASOIAF pieces that looks at several character POVs, tries to rewrite the trajectory of the series in new and fun ways, or introduces to you OCs. This is strictly a Jon and Dany romance, and with the possible exception of a POV chapter from one of our side characters, everything will be from either Jon's or Dany's perspective.
This will also likely be a somewhat slow burn. I plan to update this fic as often as I can, and suspect the finished product will be anywhere from 10-15 chapters.

Many thanks to my great friend @dracarysqueen on tumblr for reading and providing ideas and feedback, and for making the lovely chapter banners. Thank you also to @angels-are-robots for providing her services as the beta of my atrocious work. I love you both and couldn't write without your help and encouragement.
It was hot and dusty. Again. Even hotter and dustier than usual, if that was possible, and Dany was tired. She had been up late the night before, anxiously tossing and sighing while Daario slept like the dead at her side. Today she was irritated—at Daario, at the dry, choking heat, at Hizdahr for being late that morning, at the whole of Meereen for craving such juvenile sport. She sighed in exasperation as she stepped delicately along the path toward the grand arena, holding up her dress as she went. It was purest white—perhaps a foolish choice in retrospect—but she had to admit that it was striking. A statement of her position: unblemished, regal, untouchable by her enemies and the very earth itself. Even so, it was a headache to keep clean.

Hearing her sigh, Tyrion glanced up as he walked along beside her. He looked smart in a new doublet bearing the Targaryen sigil across his chest. He was in high spirits and had already been at his wine cup despite the early hour. “You’re doing the right thing, you know,” he offered.

Dany scoffed. “Has Daario been skulking off to your bedchamber to seduce you into praise of the fighting pits as well? I thought it was only me he harassed so.”

Tyrion snorted with amusement. “No, Your Grace. I’ve quite the reputation back home as a rapacious lecher, but my appetites don’t extend that far.”

The dwarf’s sense of humor was a welcome diversion on this tiresome errand. Dany smiled at him faintly as she mounted the steps to her place of honor in a prime section of the fighting pits. Missandei sat to her left, gracefully curtseying to Dany. Tyrion took a seat to her right, leaving an empty chair between them for Hizdahr.

The former master was meant to join Dany outside her quarters, to escort her to the arena, but he had not arrived at his appointed time. It didn’t sit well with her. The man was meticulous and discerning. It wasn’t like him to miss an appointment. She didn’t necessarily suspect treachery, not after the fright she’d given him with Viserion and Rhaegal before. Still, no one here seemed entirely trustworthy.

Dany was so weary of trying to judge friend from foe. How long had it been since she had felt secure, since she had felt trust in the people closest to her? Unwillingly, her mind wandered to Jorah, thoughts that had once filled her heart with warmth and security. Now her mind was clouded with anger and shame. How had his true character slipped by her notice for so long?

“Your gallant future king has decided to grace us with his presence.” Daario’s voice, sharp with
resentment, yanked her from her reverie. Dany did not turn to look at him over her shoulder but she could feel Daario bristling behind her as Hizdahr arrived in a sweep of robes, the scent of perfumed oils following him.

He bowed slightly before taking his seat at her right hand. He was resplendent in cloth-of-gold, looking every bit the part of the queen’s betrothed. It made Dany’s stomach turn to think of their engagement, but she knew that his alliance would help to quell the unrest in the city. Even so, she glared daggers at him as he sat, apprehensive at the reason for his absence.

“Where have you been?” she demanded, trying to keep her voice level.

“Just making sure everything is in order,” Hizdahr replied, smiling out at the crowd as four horseman cantered into the pit for the opening ceremony. They threw up even more dust as they circled in the center of the arena and the crowd roared out their approval. The blow of horns heralded their arrival, and enormous drums beat out a frantic beat. Dany saw for the first time how invested the Meereenese people were in this tradition, barbaric as it may be. To rule well she needed to know her subjects, even if she didn’t always like what she learned. She took a deep, calming breath as the din of the music thumped in her belly.

When the cloud that had been stirred up by the horses’ hooves settled, she saw a grinning announcer robed all in blue and gold standing in the pit. He raised an arm and, gradually, the crowd quieted. “Free citizens of Meereen!” he called, his voice clear and commanding even in the large, open space.

“By the blessings of the Graces, and her majesty the Queen,” he nodded deferentially to Dany. “Welcome to the Great Games!”

The crowd erupted with cheers and the gates lifted to allow two fighters to file in alongside the announcer. “My queen, our first contest. Who will triumph? The strong?” the announcer boomed, indicating an enormous, heavily-muscled man. He had close-cropped hair and scant armor, and wielded an enormous greatsword. “Or the quick?” the announcer asked, pointing to a smaller man. His curly hair and pleasant smile made him seem unthreatening to Dany’s eyes. He held a broadsword in one hand and a shield barely larger than a dinner plate in the other, but he looked confident as he stepped forward.

“I fight and die for your glory, my Queen,” he announced.

His burly opponent stepped up and made the same declaration. Dany swallowed a lump that formed unbidden in her throat. It was difficult to keep her composure in the face of what was about to transpire. Her path to the throne was already blood-sodden. Why must even more men die so needlessly? Were the fighting pits truly necessary to establish peace in Meereen?

“They’re waiting for you,” Hizdahr murmured. She looked up to see both men standing in silence, their eyes on her as the crowd shifted anxiously. “Clap your hands,” he urged.

She hesitated. Should anyone wield such power? The power to merely put one’s palms together and watch a man die for sport? The eyes of thousands of onlookers were focused on her and she felt their gazes acutely. Hardening her resolve, Dany sat up a little straighter, and clapped.

“I told you,” Hizdahr said gleefully, casting a glance at Daario behind him. “The larger man always prevails.”
“A lifetime of winning fights has taught me otherwise,” Daario replied darkly, his eyes on the headless corpse of the smaller, allegedly quicker man as it was dragged from the arena, blood darkening the dirt in its wake.

Dany turned away, digusted. She took no delight in this. The fight had been short and brutal, the smaller man clearly outmatched and easily bested by his adversary.

“Well,” Hizdahr went on, turning to Daario again, “I’ve spent as much of my life betting in these pits and—”

“But have you ever fought?” Dany interjected suddenly. “You, yourself. Have you ever tried to kill a man who was trying to kill you?” Hizdahr narrowed his eyes at her but gave no answer. I’ll take that as a ‘no,’ Dany thought, satisfied. She’d had enough of Hizdahr’s smugness for one day.

Tyrion sighed audibly to her right and Hizdahr raised his eyebrows at him. “You don’t approve?”

“There’s always been more than enough death in the world for my taste. I can do without it in my leisure time,” Tyrion replied grimly.

“Fair enough. But you must ask yourself this question: What great thing has ever been accomplished without killing or cruelty?”

“It’s easy to confuse what is with what ought to be, especially when what is has worked out in your favor,” Tyrion quipped. Dany felt her lips turning upward in spite of herself. Again, the little man surprised and pleased her. She sensed a kindred spirit in Tyrion. Yet she was still cautious about letting anyone get too close. She would not repeat her mistakes.

“I’m not talking about myself,” Hizdahr insisted. “I’m talking about the necessary conditions for greatness.”

Dany grimaced. “That,” she pointed to the arena, where a young boy, presumably employed by the fighting pits, carried the dead man’s head away, making ready for the next bout. “Is greatness?”

“That is a vital part of the great city of Meereen. It existed long before you arrived, and will remain standing long after we’ve returned to the dirt,” Hizdahr snapped, indignant.

“My father would have liked you.” Coming from Tyrion’s lips, it didn’t sound like a compliment. The little man appeared to Dany as though he had a bad taste in his mouth.

“One day,” she said, turning to Hizdahr, “Your great city will return to the dirt.”

“At your command?”

“If need be,” Dany replied tersely as the announcer returned below them.

“A Meereenese champion!” he exclaimed, and the crowd went into a frenzy at the sight of their favorite. The man was covered head to foot in armor, his helmet obscuring his face and neck.

“How many have to die to make this happen?” Hizdahr inquired bitterly, drawing her attention away from the fighters below. Dany clenched her fists at her sides. She was losing her patience for his contrary manner.

“If it comes to that, then they will have died for a good reason.”

“Those men think they’re dying for a good reason,” he offered, nodding at the fighters.
“Someone else’s reason,” she countered.

“So your reasons are true and theirs are false? They don’t know their own minds, but you do?”

Dany faltered at that. He was wrong. Her soldiers, her loyal retinue, their deaths were a tragedy, but anyone who followed her did so willingly. Their lives paved the path back to her homeland; they didn’t line the pockets of slavers or gamblers. She freed people from bondage. She sought to preserve life, not end it. And yet . . .

“Well said,” Tyrion chimed in. “You’re an eloquent man.” Hizdahr bowed his head graciously, a triumphant smile on his lips. Dany was surprised, turning to Tyrion wonderingly. “It doesn’t mean you’re right,” he added. “In my experience, eloquent men are right just as often as imbeciles.”

Dany snorted, delighted at Tyrion’s jab, and opened her mouth to say more. But then a familiar voice from below stopped her dead, made her very breath halt in her lungs.

“I fight and die for your glory, my Queen.”

It had been months since she had heard Jorah’s voice, but she would know it anywhere. She looked down into the pit to find his steady blue eyes on hers.

Her heart was pounding, a confusing combination of different emotions vying for control as she watched him there. Her rage at his impertinence was losing to her joy at seeing him alive after all this time. But her principal feeling was fear, fear of what was going to happen to him now.

Dany knew she had Missandei’s friendship, Grey Worm’s unflinching loyalty, Daario’s passionate devotion, and Tyrion’s sage advice. But Jorah had seen her through so much. She had no family, no close friends of the usual sort, and he was the one thing that connected her to her past. She realized to her surprise that in spite of her strength she still needed—that sort of connection. Knowing he was out in the world, alive and carrying on, had been a comfort to her in spite of everything. If she lost him, truly lost him, who would she have?

Dany was vaguely aware of the waiting crowd, their bloodlust far from sated by the first bout. Hizdahr was staring at her so hard she thought his eyes might fall from his skull. But she couldn’t move, couldn’t speak. She had exiled Jorah because the alternative was too painful. She couldn’t spill his blood. Not after Ser Barristan, Viserys, Drogo, her son . . . she couldn’t watch anyone else she cared for die.

Hizdahr squirmed uncomfortably in his seat. “Your Grace—,”

“Shut your mouth,” Daario snapped. Dany felt indescribably grateful to him in that moment as she took a shaky breath and tore her eyes away from Jorah. She realized that her pain didn’t matter. She was in a precarious position, and she couldn’t sacrifice her safety and that of her friends for Jorah. Not after his treachery. She steadied her hands and clapped once into the silence.

Jorah nodded at her before falling into a fighting stance as the announcer hurried away.

The knight wore the same armor he’d always had, the same Westerosi mail the Dothraki had mocked. Dany felt herself thankful for it now, hoping it might provide him some protection. He carried his old and battered sword and no shield.

His opponent, the well-armored Meereenese, expertly wielded a long spear, and as they squared off even Dany’s untrained eye could see that the other man was faster than Jorah, that his longer weapon gave him reach and advantage.
Jorah fought bravely, but not defensively, and Dany struggled to keep her composure as he was knocked into the dirt—twice. Every time he gained ground on his opponent, the Meereenese spear would appear, biting into flesh. It sliced up his side, his shin, his cheek, and all the while Jorah only landed one blow to his opponent’s well-armored chest.

The Meereenese deflected the blow fiercely and knocked Jorah so dramatically that the older knight fell onto his belly in the dust, panting with exertion, blood smeared across his face.

The crowd was on its feet, cheering wildly for their favored champion. He stepped toward his prey and angled his spear toward Jorah. Before making the killing blow, he paused and grinned around at his adoring audience, and then up at Dany.

“You can end this,” Tyrion entreated, looking over at her with desperation in his eyes.

“She cannot,” Hizdahr declared simply, watching the fray without any sign of discomfort.

“You can,” Tyrion pleaded again.

Dany turned away from Tyrion, ignoring him, ignoring the screams of protest in her own mind. She couldn’t look back, couldn’t falter. She had not put Jorah in that fighting pit, and she couldn’t take him out of it.

Down below, Jorah turned onto his back, looking up at his attacker with determination in his eyes. When Dany did nothing to stop him, the Meereenese spearman made his thrust, but Jorah was faster. He caught the spear in both hands right as the point grazed his breastplate, halting its movement. The Meereenese champion had become cocksure in his advantage and was taken aback at Jorah’s strength. He froze in shock as the older knight pushed back against the spear, rising to his knees with a grunt of effort and sending his assailant staggering backward.

Dany suppressed a gasp of relief, and before the spearman could get his bearings, Jorah lifted his sword from the dirt and rolled at his opponent, closing the distance between them in one swift movement. His blade jutted upward in a flash, impaling the Meereenese champion, the point pushing through his gut and emerging from his back, dripping with gore.

The crowd sat in stunned silence for a heartbeat. But then within seconds the arena was deafening with the sound of boos from the audience, all of them dismayed at the unexpected demise of their favorite fighter. They yelled curses, shaking their fists, bustling to leave their seats as if they could descend into the pits and put an end to Jorah themselves.

He got to his feet unsteadily and approached the stands, gazing up at Dany with quiet sort of pride as he struggled to catch his breath. She met his eyes, torn between elation at his victory and dismay at the madness of the crowd.

But then Jorah’s face changed, contorted with rage as he stooped over, his hand closing around the Meereenese spear at his feet. Dany stood slowly as Jorah raised the weapon and took aim at... her?

She shook her head in disbelief. He couldn’t. He wouldn’t. Even in the face of his lies she had trusted him, had believed him when he swore his love. Jorah, of all people, wouldn’t harm her. Yet there he stood.

Her instincts overtook her emotions and she backed away to take cover as Daario reached for her in alarm. At that moment, Jorah made his throw, and the spear whizzed by her and found its mark—not her, no. A Son of the Harpy, only inches behind them, a knife in hand. Missandei gasped as the Harpy fell, his tarnished golden mask clanking loudly against the wooden floor of the stands.
Screams rent the air all around the arena and Dany looked up in horror to see that countless people had donned Harpy masks. One by one they seized the helpless victims trapped beside them and began killing them all. Stabbing, slicing, strangling. It was a massacre. People trampled one another in their haste as they tried to flee, but it was no use. The Harpies outnumbered them all.

“Protect your Queen!” Daario ordered, and a handful of Unsullied guards encircled them.

Dany and Missandei were side-by-side, their backs to the arena as Hizdahr scurried about in a panic and Daario and the guards took out the first wave of Harpies charging the royal seats. Tyrion pressed in beside them, a dagger drawn. For the moment, it seemed their position was at least defensible. But Dany knew their numbers couldn’t hold out, and their elevated place in the stands wasn’t high enough to fend off attacks on all sides.

“Your Grace,” Hizdahr yelled, his voice high with terror. “This way, I know a way out!” He started to flee into the pit, but a trio of Harpies climbed onto their platform behind him. They seized Hizdahr by the arms, stabbing him mercilessly in the chest before throwing him to the ground. Well, at least he wasn’t conspiring with them, Dany thought as Daario rushed in to intercept Hizdahr’s killers.

He dispensed with two of them easily, his knives as vicious as they were efficient. The third Harpy leapt to Daario’s right and got behind him while he was distracted, wrenching his blade from a fallen Harpy’s chest. The Harpy found an opening, raising his sword to strike.

“No!” Dany screamed, reaching out to Daario helplessly. In a blur of movement another figure leapt onto the platform and stabbed the Harpy in the back just as his sword was about to fall. Daario wheeled to face his savior, his eyes widening with shock as they found Jorah’s.

For a tense moment, no one moved. But then Jorah extended his hand to Dany, a gesture of reconciliation and aid. She took it without delay and let him lead her to the edge of the stands. The feeling of his rough palms on her skin brought back a flood of memories, of other times he had helped her. Her wedding day, her miscarriage—every time she had been vulnerable and alone, he had been by her side. She owed Jorah her life as sure as she owed him her suspicion and doubt. Regardless, she needed his protection now, and worried that it wouldn’t be enough to save them. Not this time.

He jumped into the pit below and raised his arms to help guide Dany down. But she hesitated, looking behind her at the chaos and violence. There were bodies everywhere, and Hizdahr in his death throes under the seats. Missandei was running in their direction, pursued by an attacker.

Dany pulled away from Jorah and turned back toward her friend, but stopped when she caught sight of Tyrion. He was as quick as he was silent, appearing seemingly out of nowhere to slash at the legs of Missandei’s assailter. He took the frightened girl by the elbow and his eyes fell on Dany. “Go,” he commanded jogging beside Missandei as they followed Dany into the pit.

Daario sprinted ahead and leapt to the ground before them, clearing a path in the growing crowd of Harpies that were clambering over the stands and gathering in the pit. Dany could see the exit Daario was fighting toward, but already it was overrun.

Behind her, more Harpies began to follow them down from where they’d been sitting before. It had all happened so quickly, but somehow they were surrounded. The few remaining Unsullied guards formed a circle with Jorah, Daario, and Tyrion. Dany stood in the middle with Missandei.

Their line held steady as Daario and the others intercepted the attacks of the few Harpies brave enough to charge at their drawn weapons. But when more than one got brave enough to run in, it was difficult to rebuff them. First one Unsullied soldier fell, then another. Daario was hit in the
shoulder by a spear thrown from the crowd, and Jorah was losing his momentum, blood pooling at the foot of his leg that had been wounded in the fight before.

The gravity of the situation fell upon Dany like a dark storm cloud rolling in off the ocean. She felt the icy grip of fear around her heart as the enemy pressed in. She closed her eyes, trying not to break down. If she was going to die here, she would die bravely, with dignity. But it was difficult to resign herself to the end. *I’m the Blood of the Dragon*, she thought fiercely. *After all I’ve suffered, I can’t fall here. Not like this.*

Dany clasped Missandei’s hand and felt her friend squeeze reassuringly back. It gave her courage. She opened her eyes, resolved to step up and at the very least go down with a fight. But before she could make a move, an ear-splitting screech seemed to shatter the sky above.

*Drogon!*

A bright red ball of flame shot across the stands, and even from her location far below Dany could feel the intensity of its heat on her face. Another chorus of screams came down from the crowd, but this time it was the screams of her enemies. She smiled, her eyes following her precious dragon as he descended into the arena, a great black shadow.

Drogon had always been the largest of the three, but during his absence he’d grown far bigger. His form seemed to block out the sun as he hovered in the air above them. Every beat of his gigantic black wings reverberated through the air like a clap of thunder and sent a gust of wind down onto the onlookers below.

The sight of him left Dany speechless with a peculiar mixture of relief and dread. She was overjoyed to see him alive, and it warmed her heart to think that he had somehow sensed that she was in danger. But would even Drogon’s wrath be enough to save them now? It was bad enough she faced her own demise in this pit, but she couldn’t allow Drogon to be taken by these filthy murderers.

Another burst of flame laid waste to a trio of Harpies below him, making space for Drogon to land with a thud that shook the very ground beneath their feet. The Harpies immediately went on the defensive, but it hardly mattered. The great dragon effortlessly snatched one of them up in his jaws and chewed the man in half, silencing his panicked yelps in a shower of blood. He then turned to the crowd of men advancing on Dany and the others and sent forth a fireball, all black and red. The air around them shimmered with heat and Dany’s hair blew back from her face as the Harpies’ cloaks caught fire, their faces melting beneath their metal masks.

The sickly sweet smell of roasting flesh filled the air, and Dany felt hope reignite in her heart as she watched Drogon clear a path through the men who sought to harm her as easily as a hot knife went through butter. But then one of the Harpies abandoned caution, advanced to defend himself. He threw a spear through Drogon’s left wing, and the dragon responded with a roar of pain and rage that knocked the air from Dany’s lungs.

The other Harpies took note, and before long, it was raining spears from the stands. Their aim was compromised by the smoke in the air, but several of the spears found their mark and embedded themselves cruelly in Drogon’s shimmering, black scales.

Daario and the others were occupied, fighting off the handful of Harpies remaining in the pit, but Dany could see that Drogon could only last so long under such a vicious assault. She knew what she had to do, not only to protect Drogon, but to save her friends as well. If she left the ring, the Harpies’ target would leave with her.

Dropping Missandei’s hand, Dany started toward her dragon, heedless of the torrent of arrows and
spears flying chaotically about. She pushed through her protectors, ignoring Jorah’s protests and Tyrion’s inquiring, “Your Grace?” as she went. When she stepped up to Drogon, his head whipped around to face her and he let out a roar so deafening that every occupant of the stadium froze for just a moment.

Dany could see herself reflected in his fearsome scarlet eyes, looking small and frightened. *I must show him no fear,* she thought determinedly. So Dany didn’t flinch. She stared him down, ignoring the flesh and bone she could see clinging to his long black teeth, defying every instinct in her body that commanded her to turn and run away from such a beast. She stood tall and didn’t blink, willing Drogon to calm, to recognize her authority as well as her love.

She reached out to him, standing her ground even in the face of all his fury. Her fingers grazed his nose and Drogon leaned his head forward gently to meet her touch. Dany sighed at the feel of his smooth scales beneath her fingers, stepping closer to the heat that came off of him in waves. But then the spell was broken as another spear sailed down at them and landed deep in Drogon’s side.

He turned on his attacker with a savage growl, burning a whole section of Harpies in the stands with a devastating breath of flame. While he was distracted, Dany reached up with both hands and pried the spear from Drogon’s side. He screeched in pain but made no move to stop her as the spear finally tugged free. Dany threw it down into the dirt. The end of the spear was half-melted, the wound in Drogon’s side steaming in the air.

*He is fire made flesh,* Dany thought. *And so am I.* She gathered her skirts and prepared for what she knew must come next.

She’d never ridden her dragons before. She had hardly touched or seen Drogon in months. But just as Drogon had seemed to come to her aid by instinct, she somehow knew she could do this. She trusted him to obey her commands and carry them both to their salvation.

Drogon seemed to feel her grasping at his hide and lowered himself slightly for Dany to clamber onto him. It wasn’t exactly graceful, not in her dress, but she managed well enough. She settled herself onto his back, finding a spot where the dragon’s spikes were conveniently shorter and duller, as if his crest was made to accommodate a rider.

Sitting astride him, Dany could feel the astonished eyes of everyone upon her as she leaned forward and whispered, “*Sōvēs.*” The Valyrian word for “fly” felt natural on her lips, powerful. Drogon bounded forward on cue, his muscles quivering beneath her as he stirred up a cloud of red sand. The dragon felt hot and strong between her thighs as he leapt forward, scattering Harpies in his wake and taking to the air with a flap of his great wings. *Yes,* Dany thought. *Yes. Fly. Fly!* They ascended quickly, the Harpies and friendly faces alike flashing by in a blur of color, and Dany’s heart pounded with euphoric wonder as she clung to Drogon with all her might. Looking down into the pit below, she saw that it was just as she had hoped—the few remaining Harpies had completely forgotten her friends, awestruck and outraged by her surprise escape. There she was: the Mother of Dragons, riding her dragon as her ancestors in Old Valyria had done.

They were about to clear the highest point of the stadium at last, the clear, blue sky beckoning them forth. The heat that had oppressed her below was chased away by the wind as Drogon rose to the heavens.

But then there was *pain,* pain sharper and more excruciating than anything she’d ever felt. Lights danced before her eyes and Dany gasped, struggling to hold her seat as her right thigh exploded with agony. She looked down to see the blooming crimson of her own blood spreading rapidly over the formerly white fabric covering her leg. The speed of Drogon’s flight should have sent it flapping in
the breeze, but the dress was held fast by an arrow sunk deep within her thigh.

She gazed at it in abject horror for a moment, unable to believe that after all that had just transpired, this was happening. She was so close to her escape, and it was snatched away from her in the flash of an arrow’s flight.

In a fit of mad panic, Dany reached down and pulled at the arrow, heedless of how it might be stopping up the wound. But the pain was too great to remove it in any case, and her yanking merely ground the arrow’s shaft against the puncture in her leg.

Drogon, ignorant of his mother’s plight, continued to ascend up and away from the stadium, and when Dany looked down she saw only the rooftops of Meereen below them, the fighting pits fading into the distance behind.

It was a victory, but Dany could hardly celebrate. Jostling the arrow seemed to have done more harm than good to her leg, and she was bleeding heavily, the blood oozing down her leg, filling up her boot, dripping off to rain on the ground below.

Dany’s head was swimming with adrenaline and a faint dizziness started to overtake her as Drogon cleared the city and flew out over the bay. Vaguely, she realized that the pain in her leg was fading. In fact, she could hardly feel her legs at all, nor the cold air as it rushed past her face.

A bone-deep tiredness hovered over her, as if she had just traversed the span of the Dothraki sea on foot. She wrapped her arms around Drogon’s neck as much as she could manage, but he was too broad for her to get a good hold. She rested her head as best she could despite the spikes of his crest against her face. Discomfort hardly seemed to matter, exhausted as she was.

She had enough sense left to hope that she wouldn’t fall off. Even so, she discovered she didn’t have the strength to stay awake for her own safety. Pretty, she mused to herself as the afternoon sun glinted off the water below. Drogon had sailed out over open ocean. She didn’t know where he was taking her, but Dany had no choice but to trust him as her eyes fluttered closed.

It was the cold that woke her. Dany wasn’t used to the cold. Her vision was blurry and she tried to sit up, but the effort made her see stars so she collapsed onto her back, wondering where she was.

“Drogon?” she called weakly, her voice barely a hoarse whisper.

When her sight cleared she looked around, at once making note of Drogon’s absence. One didn’t simply misplace a beast his size—he was gone. Dany fought to gain her bearings, staving off panic. She forced herself to sit up, pushing past the onslaught of dizziness and nausea that came with the movement. She saw then that she was sitting in a forest clearing, encircled by bare, brown trees. Such landscapes were foreign to her after years in the desserts of Essos. But most foreign of all was that she was lying on a thick blanket of snow.

Where has Drogon brought me?

The demands of her wounded body began to overtake her shock and confusion, and Dany felt the intensity of the cold. She was shivering so much that it was hard to move, hard to breathe through the shakes. There was a downed tree nearby, and Dany noticed that it was smoking. Had Drogon started some sort of fire in the night? She couldn’t be sure, but either way the smoldering tree trunk would
be warmer than the open, snowy forest floor.

She stretched out on the ground with great difficulty and dragged herself painfully through the snow up to the tree, ignoring the screaming pain in her leg as she went. Dany found a spot where flames had burned away the snow and she nestled against the scorched, still-warm trunk. It was no real shelter from the cold, but it would have to do.

Dany knew that while the icy chill in the air was a concern, her wounded leg was likely the more immediate problem. She looked down to see that the blood saturating her thigh had clotted and dried, her leg stiff with it. The wound itself was so swollen that one of her thighs looked noticeably larger than the other. She hesitantly touched the arrow and was rewarded with a spasm of pain so great that she cried out.

At her cry, Dany heard a twig snap behind her. Alarmed, she turned and squinted at the tree line, struggling to find the source of the noise. She thought she could make out two red eyes glowing at her from the darkness, too small to belong to a dragon. But then Dany sucked in a startled breath as a tall figure clad in black approached, stepping into the moonlit clearing.
Jon was on watch when it happened.

Ordinarily the Lord Commander himself couldn’t be bothered with something as mundane as watch duty. But he was so overburdened by worries and responsibilities as of late that he found the watch to be a welcome distraction. It was funny, in his younger years Jon had loathed being up there on The Wall in the merciless cold, bored and fighting off sleep. Now he rather enjoyed being at the top of the world in the bracingly chill air, and walking the battlements gave purpose to his sleepless nights.

Looking forward to another restless evening, Jon relieved a young and very grateful recruit from his watch and settled in atop The Wall. It was a quiet night, so cold that it stung the exposed skin on his face. But mercifully there was no wind, even at the extreme altitude of the battlements.

The dry, still air made for nearly perfect visibility and Jon gazed contemplatively out at the stars. Their twinkling lights matched the flickering fires of the Wildling encampments below.

Not all of them could fit in Castle Black, of course, so when Jon had returned from Hardhome at the head of their host, he had faced the consternation of Ser Alliser and Tormund Giantsbane alike. The Free Folk hadn’t taken kindly to the notion that they had traveled South only to continue living on the rough, surviving in crude encampments and strictly forbidden from settling near the Northern villages that still bore fresh memories of Wildling raids.

Without the Northern woods to hunt in or their familiar homeland to forage in, the liberated Wildlings looked to the Night's Watch for food as much as for shelter, and it was emptying the
Brothers’ coffers to feed them all. Something had to be done, and fast.

It didn’t help that most of the Brothers were still vehemently against Jon’s attempts at unification and reconciliation. Most of them hadn’t ranged North of The Wall, hadn’t seen the terrifying phenomenon of the fallen turning into monsters, turning into soldiers of the dead. So they didn’t understand why peace with the Wildlings was more important than ever. They didn’t know that this alliance was essential, non-negotiable. Most of Jon’s brothers saw the Wildlings as threats and a drain on resources. They seemed to fancy Jon himself as the traitor who brought this all down on their heads.

And Jon knew it, could see it on every one of their faces as they passed him in the halls. The admiration and respect that had shone in all of their eyes after Jon had helped to defend Castle Black against the Wildling assault a year ago was replaced with suspicion and resentment. All of it left Jon feeling utterly alone.

He had Sam, of course. But it wouldn’t be long before Sam traveled to the Citadel to do vital research. They needed to find more dragonglass. Or better yet, another method for killing wights. So Sam’s errand was necessary and urgent, but it would leave Jon with few men he could rely on. Edd was still around, bless him. But while Jon was surprised by the companionship of Tormund and even Davos Seaworth, he still felt dismally alone out here at the edge of the world, the weight of thousands of lives nearly crushing the breath from his lungs every day. So many people depended on him.

Jon was honored to be the Lord Commander, and having the authority to make important decisions on his own—like the decision to bring the Wildlings into the fold—was invaluable. But sometimes he felt himself wishing that he had someone to share the burdens of command with, someone who really understood what it was like have the fate of so many on his conscience.

As if sensing his master’s lonesome thoughts, Ghost padded quietly up beside Jon and sat back on his haunches, staring out at the vast expanse of The Gift. Jon chuckled and patted Ghost on the head.

“Here to keep me company?” he asked the wolf. Ghost’s ears quivered as he listened, his intelligent crimson eyes never straying from the forest down below. “Good. You can cover this side for me,” Jon joked, scratching Ghost affectionately behind the ears before turning to face the darkness he’d been avoiding. “I’ve been watching the wrong side of The Wall anyway.”

He felt a chill down his spine, gazing out into the great unknown North of The Wall. How many wights were out there now? What were the Others planning? How long did he have to plan? It boggled his mind to think of the immensity of the threat they were facing, and in spite of all he’d been through, Jon still felt ill-equipped for this challenge.

A low and menacing growl disturbed Jon’s musings and he turned to see Ghost on his feet, the hair along his back standing on end as he stared at something intently.

“What is it, boy?” Jon asked, squinting into the dark and following Ghost’s gaze to the woods far below. The forested areas south of The Wall weren’t as dense the Haunted Forest, but there was still enough substantial greenery to provide plenty of lumber to the Watch. The trees were situated far enough away that Jon had difficulty making them out in the dark, but close enough to rouse Ghost to any danger therein. Even so, Jon didn’t see anything. No light came from the trees and from what he could tell, no movement.

It was strange for Ghost to growl at nothing. He was no nervous whelp. So when he saw a threat it was usually a real one. Jon tried in vain to locate the disturbance in the dark and distant woods for a moment more before giving up and turning back north, dismissing the direwolf’s odd behavior. But it
wasn’t long before Ghost growled again, and this time he nudged Jon insistently with his nose.

That got Jon’s attention. A dark dread seized upon him at Ghost’s urgency, and he felt even more unnerved by the peculiar sound of a lone gust of wind. It was strange, the sound came from down below and was localized to the woods. It was followed quickly by another, identical gust. Jon thought madly that it sounded like the beat of great wings but when he turned and looked down to the trees, he saw nothing; and besides, there was nothing with wings large enough to create such a noise. Ghost whined anxiously and looked upward, directing Jon’s gaze again, this time to the sky. But the gusting sounds were gone and when Jon stared, he saw nothing but the stars.

He thought that would be the end of it. Instead, Ghost trained his glowing eyes on Jon and paced anxiously back and forth. *He wants to go down there*, Jon thought. *But why?*

Over the years, Jon had spent enough time around Ghost to know that he was no ordinary animal. If he was making this much of a fuss, it was worth a look. The woods were enough of a trek to require his horse unless Jon wanted to spend a fair bit of time hiking out in the cold dark alone, and there had been a heavy snowfall the day before. The fresh powder was deep and would be tiring to traverse on foot, but fetching his horse from the stables at this hour would not go unnoticed. *Perhaps that’s just as well*, Jon mused. *It might do to bring someone else along.* But what if it wound up being nothing? The last thing he needed was more reason for his Brothers to be angry with him, and waking them just to drag them out into the woods in the middle of the night for a false alarm was a sure way to stroke their ire.

So it was decided. He would go alone with his horse, just to be safe. He only hoped his solitary midnight ride wouldn’t rouse too much suspicion.

In the closeness of the forest, the night was as silent and windless as it had been upon The Wall, but the trees obstructed the moonlight and made the formerly peaceful quiet feel eerie and sinister.

As Jon moved into the thick of the wood, his horse became more of a hazard than a help, so he dismounted and tethered the big, black destrier to a tree before pressing on. Ghost walked lightly just ahead of him and Jon followed his wolf rather than any path. It was clear that Ghost had some scent or goal that he was pressing toward, and Jon was content to trust him.

He was careful to move quietly, not to snap any branches or trip on any roots peeking up out of the snow. Jon had more courage than most but creeping toward an unknown disturbance alone in a dark forest had his hair standing on end. Whatever he and Ghost were to find, he hoped they’d find it soon, and not be noticed in the finding.

After what felt like an eternity of picking his way through trees and brush, he noticed a small clearing up ahead. Ghost halted just in front of him and Jon followed suit. He could see at once that this was their destination—the trees near the clearing had been damaged by, well, *something*. There were broken branches littering the ground in their path. It looked as though a giant had run blindly through the area.

As Jon peered closer he could make out something lying in the center of the clearing. Not a tree branch, but an entire, fallen tree, its wide trunk casting a shadow on the snowy forest floor. Squinting into the dark, Jon realized that there was something pressed up against the tree—a person trying to take shelter, a girl. He took a step forward in wonder, a stick breaking in two loudly under his boot.
He cursed himself silently for his carelessness and looked up to see the girl shifting slowly into a sitting position. She moved laboriously, like she was in pain, and even from his hiding spot in the trees, Jon could see that she was gravely injured. Her right leg was caked in dried blood from thigh to foot. His first instinct was to help her, but was wary of a trap.

It seemed strange for such a girl to wind up in the middle of the forest, injured and alone, without him or others witnessing her arrival. It occurred to Jon that she might be a lone Wildling, feigning injury to entrap a Northern traveler and steal from him. But her location deep in the woods made that seem unlikely, and the longer he looked at the shivering, wounded girl, the more her distress seemed genuine.

They were on the wrong side of The Wall for White Walkers, and were a decent hike from the Wildling encampment. So who had done this to her?

She was holding herself up with one, trembling arm, her weak breath steaming in the night air. Looking at her there, Jon dismissed his fears of traps and foul play. She needed help. He turned to Ghost, knowing the great beast would likely only frighten her, frail thing that she was. “Stay,” he mouthed to the wolf before taking a step into the clearing.

The girl turned toward him with great effort as he approached her, and her eyes found his. Jon stopped short at the startling sight. He had never seen anyone with features like hers before, and it was disarming. Her eyes were wide like a doe’s as she stared him down, and the rich hue of her irises reminded Jon of lavender blooms, a rare sight in the frigid North. Even with only the moon’s light, her eyes stood out vividly from her dirty, blood-smeared face. More startling still was her hair. Jon knew that the Lannisters were envied for their fine golden-blonde hair, the fairness a rarity and a sign of beauty. But their locks seemed common when compared to the girl’s. Her hair was matted and damp from the snow she’d been lying in, but in the moonlight Jon still saw that it was almost white, more silver than gold.

After a moment her face hardened and she glared up at him, fidgeting uncomfortably and favoring her wounded leg. Jon realized with dismay that he should have said something long before now, had he not been staring at her agape like a fool.

“What happened?” he asked, looking pointedly at her bloodied right side. She said nothing, so Jon tried again. “Who hurt you? Are they still around here?” he put his hand on the pommel of Longclaw reflexively, looking around the clearing for signs of intruders, footsteps, a struggle.

“They can’t harm me here,” the girl said in a small voice.

“Ah. Um, good.” Jon cleared his throat loudly, fumbling for words. “You’re wounded,” he stated simply. “I can help you.”

She scooted a bit to face him more fully, gritting her teeth in pain with the movement. “I don’t need help.” Her eyes swept wildly all about the clearing as she searched for something, visibly distraught.

“Where is he?” she asked, seemingly to herself.

“Where is who?”

The girl looked back at Jon as though he was an unwelcome nuisance. “He must have gone after some food,” she mumbled, shaking her head.

“Who?”

She sighed. “Drogon.”
Jon had never heard that name before. "Who is Drogon? Who are you?"

She made no answer, instead gathering her uninjured leg beneath her and bracing herself with her palms. She was trying to stand.

"Don't," Jon said quickly, but not quickly enough. She wobbled up onto one foot for a fraction of a second before falling again, this time onto her belly in the snow.

Jon hurried over and dropped to his knees next to her. It was then he saw the source of all the blood he'd noticed on her clothes before. An arrow was lodged deep in her thigh, the puncture in her flesh hideously swollen. It was a considerable injury; the blood was clotted around the hole for now, but if the arrow was removed she would almost surely bleed out.

The girl turned her head to face him, a furious resolve in her eyes as she struggled to turn herself over. Jon bent down, reaching to help push her over so that she didn’t have her face against the cold ground like that. "Let me help--"

"I've . . . Got it," she gasped. Sure enough, the girl managed to flip onto her back and sit up slightly, leaning back on her bare elbows. Jon noticed for the first time that her arms and shoulders were curiously exposed. The elegant white dress she wore was wet, dirty, and bloodied, but he could still see that it was fine fabric, a strange choice for this climate. It left her chest, arms, shoulders, and back open to the biting wind and the snow she now reclined in. It had to be horribly uncomfortable, even if it did put her lovely skin on display . . .

Jon mentally struck himself for such a thought. Shaking his head, he removed his cloak and held it out to her awkwardly.

For a moment he worried that her pride would prohibit even this small assistance, but then she nodded and Jon sighed with relief. He reached around her and draped the cape behind, helping her to sit up slightly so that he could tuck it between her and the unforgiving, icy ground beneath. He drew the remaining fabric over and covered her the best he could before sitting back on his heels to examine his handiwork.

The small bit of warmth couldn’t have come at a better time. She was shaking with cold, though she tried to hide it, and Jon could see her paling rapidly, her lips almost blue.

"That really is serious." He gestured to her leg. "I'm no maester but I can help you some. It will be difficult for us to get there but I can bring you back to the castle and have it looked at."

The fight seemed drain out of her striking eyes at the prospect of warmth and aid, and she looked as though she would accept his offer. But then she shook her head. "I can't leave. Drogon might return and if he does I must be here. I must go back home. I have to help them," she insisted.

Jon raised an eyebrow at her in wonder. “I don’t think you’ll be traveling any time soon. It’s you that needs help.”

“But I must go back. They’re in danger.”

He couldn’t help but smile at her tenacity. She was lying on Death’s doorstep and still thinking only of others. Jon was almost certain that she was mad but there was something admirable about her spirit.

“The one in danger at this moment, my lady, is you.”

She was silent, biting her lip and staring off into the woods as if deep in thought. “I appreciate your
assistance,” she began finally. “But I need to be here when Drogon returns, and I cannot go to your
castle. Others cannot know that I’m here.” She considered Jon for a moment, her face darkening. “It
could be a problem that even you know that I am here.”

Jon scowled. “If I didn’t know you were here, you’d freeze to death before morning.”

“I know,” she admitted, sighing. She collapsed back onto his cloak, her silver hair fanning out
around her. Her arms crossed over her chest as she turned her face away from Jon, obstinately
refusing to cooperate. She was beginning to test his patience.

“I won’t leave you here to die, and since you won’t tell me who Drogon is, I can’t find him either.
You’re in no state for the ride to Castle Black yet.” Jon paused, scratching his chin thoughtfully.
“There’s a shack nearby. Used to belong to a fur trapper who provided pelts to the Watch. He died at
The Wall during the Wildling raid last year. His hut should be empty. We’ll head there for now.”

The girl sat back up suddenly, her eyes wide. “‘Castle Black,’ ‘the Watch’ . . . Do you mean to tell
me that we’re near The Wall?”

Jon frowned at her obviously genuine shock. He could see she was in bad shape, but how could she
be so disoriented as to have no idea she was near The Wall? “Well, yes. We’re barely a mile south of
it.”

“But how?” She was talking to herself again it seemed. “How long was I out? It must have taken
Drogon ages to fly here, and injured, too. Oh, I hope he’s alright.” Tears shined in her pale purple
eyes as she fretted about her lost companion. But Jon was more concerned with what she’d said.

“I’m sorry, did you say you flew here?”

The pitiful girl watched at him for a moment. Her scrutiny made him uncomfortable.

“Yes,” she answered finally, and Jon felt a bark of shocked laughter escape his throat into the silence
between them. She was delusional to believe such a thing. Her leg must have been badly infected to
make her speak and behave so strangely.

“Well, I don’t suppose you can fly away again. You need warmth and dressing for that leg. Now. I’ll
help you to my horse.”

Jon leaned down and watched the girl’s eyes for any sign of fear as he scooped her up. She didn’t
look happy about it but she seemed to have finally relented, apparently understanding the severity of
her situation at last. She lifted her arms and draped them around his neck as Jon clutched her small
body against his. She had the metallic smell of blood on her, and something else—scented oils, spicy
and exotic.
As Jon stepped toward the trees he remembered Ghost waiting obediently within the wood. “Listen,” he murmured at her ear as he walked, careful to step lightly so as not to jar her wounded leg. “Up ahead, we’re going to see something that might scare you. But don’t worry, he’s friendly. Well, when I want him to be.”

At his words the girl tightened her grip on him apprehensively. Her long, tangled hair hung down over his arm, and she nestled her face against his shoulder for warmth. He could tell that her survival instincts, which demanded that she accept Jon’s aid, were at war with her pride. Shivering against his chest, she felt tiny and vulnerable for someone so fiery and outspoken.

Ghost rose from his seated position up ahead and wagged his tail at the sight of Jon and his new companion.

“Ghost, to me,” Jon ordered. The direwolf walked over and stood still as a statue before them.

The girl turned her face toward Ghost curiously, and her expression betrayed no fear—only wonder.
“He’s lovely,” she breathed, her lips curling upward with delight. “He’s so . . . big.”

Jon grinned, pleasantly surprised by her reaction. “Aye. He’s big alright. He’s a direwolf.”

Ghost sniffed at her injured leg and let out a plaintive whine. “I read that they were a myth,” she whispered. “Or only resided north of The Wall.”

“Most of them do,” Jon agreed, nodding to Ghost as they pressed forward through the trees. “But Ghost and his brothers and sisters came to my family years ago. And as for myths, well . . . I’ve learned anything is possible.”

“Hm.” The girl’s eyes searched Jon’s face. “My savior, the wrangler of direwolves. Who are you? How did you happen to be nearby in this desolate place, close enough to find me?”

“You’re awfully bold with your questions when you refuse to answer any of mine,” Jon remarked.

“You’re a strange man carrying me to an abandoned house. Don’t you think that at least warrants an introduction?”

“And you’re a strange woman with an arrow in her leg who speaks of flying. That courtesy should go both ways.”

“You first then,” she commanded, with the air of someone used to getting their way. Jon decided that based on their limited interaction thus far, it was pointless to argue with such a girl.

“I’m Jon.”

“Jon who?”

He sighed in exasperation, struggling to keep his composure. “Why are you so eager to know?”

She looked away from him for a moment, concern knitting her brows together. “There are some people, Jon, who would do me harm if they had the chance. I need to know now what sort of person you are.”

“Couldn’t I just lie? Say I’m some nobody? Then how would you know if I’m one of these elusive enemies of yours? Whoever you are.”

“If you lied, I’d know,” she answered. Jon glanced down and was taken aback by the sadness in her eyes. “I’m no stranger to liars and treachery.”

“I’m not a liar or a traitor.”

“Then tell me your name!”

"Fine,” he snapped. “It’s Snow.”

The girl was silent for a moment.

"A bastard of the North," she observed.

"What of it?"

"Nothing. Such designations will hold no significance in the world I mean to create."

Jon snorted. "The world you mean to 'create'? Do you fancy yourself a sorceress? A flying
sorceress?" The thought gave him a moment's pause. After meeting the Lady Melisandre, he realized it wasn’t so implausible.

"No. A queen." Her tone betrayed no jest, so Jon didn't laugh. Studying her he noticed that she did have some of the traits of high birth. On each hand she wore a fine ring, so fine that their price would feed all his Brothers for half a year. She had clear, fine skin and her hair, messy as it was, was still thick and shiny. Her manner of speaking suggested confidence and intelligence. Even so, how could she be a queen?

They arrived at the spot where he’d tied his horse before. The stallion whickered a greeting at the sight of his master. “Well, whatever you are, I hope you know how to ride a horse.”

“Of course I can ride a horse.” She glared at him as if that fact should be obvious. “But with my leg it will be difficult.”

“Aye. Which is why you’ll ride in front of me, side saddle so you don’t have to straddle him. The ride will only be a few minutes.”

She looked from Jon to the horse, clearly trying to weigh her options, still hesitant about putting herself so fully into the hands of a stranger. “Very well. I’m going to trust you, Jon Snow. But know that if you harm me you’ll live to regret it.”

Jon didn’t know what to say to that. He simply nodded, lifting the girl up onto the horse. She tried to hide it, but he couldn’t miss her wince of pain when she found her seat on the horse’s back. Jon had to give her credit for such strength. With an arrow wound like hers, it must have been agony, but she continued to carry herself with dignity despite the pain and the relentless cold.

He vaulted into the saddle behind her and then reached around her waist to take the reins. She stiffened, still understandably wary of such intimate closeness with a man she’d just met. She wore courage like armor, but Jon could still sense her nervousness.

It made him sad to imagine what she must have suffered before. She reminded him somehow of his little sister, Arya. Like Arya she was stubborn and seemed perfectly capable of taking care of herself under normal circumstances. But now she needed someone, and he was glad he had been the one to find her.

Ser Alliser had once told Jon his good heart would get him killed. But today, Jon thought with satisfaction, it was saving an innocent girl’s life.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Drop a comment if you enjoyed it and have a lovely day :D
Hi guys! I'm a couple days late on this chapter, I know! My apologies. Thank you so much for your continued interest in and feedback on my story! I really appreciate it :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dany wasn’t sure what was worse, the sharp jab of pain in her leg with every plodding step Jon’s horse took, or the uncontrollable chattering of her teeth in the cold.

There had been some chilly desert nights in her past, but nothing compared to the cold of the North, a cold so intense that the exposed flesh of her face actually burned. Behind her, Jon seemed mostly unbothered by the temperature. He sat steady and silent, his gloved hands holding the reins on either side of her as he guided his horse slowly out of the woods.

Dany worried that her own hands might very well freeze solid and snap off. She was hugging herself tightly, Jon’s thick, black cloak providing at least some protection from the elements as she clutched it desperately. She wished that Drogon would come back. Admittedly in her current state she couldn’t exactly mount him and fly away, but she longed for a nice, hot, crackling fire. Who better to provide it than a dragon?

With no Drogon in sight, Dany had no choice but to make do with Jon Snow and his rough-gaited horse. She was shivering so hard that she felt precarious in her seat. Clearly, she wasn’t built for this weather, but she was doing her best not to show it. She sat up straight as a board in the saddle and touched Jon as little as possible, betraying no more weakness than was absolutely necessary.

The young man seemed nice enough, but she didn’t trust him. Not yet.

As if sensing her thoughts, Jon spoke up from behind her. “I can tell you’re freezing. You’d be warmer if you sat back. You could shield your face a bit.”

Dany turned her head slightly to look at Jon. The concern in his brown eyes seemed genuine, but in her experience there were few people who would fuss so much over a stranger’s wellbeing. She said nothing, and was careful to keep her posture, refusing his offer.
He exhaled loudly when Dany ignored him. She could sense the frustration coming off him in waves, but when he spoke again, his voice was measured, soft and kind. “I’m not going to hurt you. And I’m not going to . . . touch you or anything if that’s what you’re worried about. I’ve spent my whole life in the North. I know the cold, and I know you’re too cold. You’ll feel much better if you just do as I say.”

**Do as he says?** Dany didn’t appreciate being told what to do, not after spending most of her life being told not only what to do but where to go, how to act, what to say, and always being careful not to ‘wake the dragon.’ Ever since she’d become khaleesi, she’d been the one doing the telling. Not that she relished giving orders, of course. But she did enjoy the freedom to make her own choices and do what she thought was right without having to answer to anyone else.

Just then she wasn’t sure what the right course of action was. To show her vulnerability to Jon Snow could be a mistake. What could he learn about her if she let her guard down? And if he knew her identity, what would he do with her? Would he sell her out for ransom? Put her in shackles while she slept so that she woke up on a boat back to Slavers’ Bay? Or worse, hand her over to some Lannister bounty hunter seeking the price that no-doubt still sat upon her head?

But then, she reasoned, glancing forlornly down at her overly swollen thigh, what defense could she really put up in her condition? Even if she upheld her suspicions about Jon Snow’s character, even if she was constantly vigilant and slept with one eye open, if Jon meant her harm, she would be equally helpless either way. Perhaps if she trusted him or at least pretended to, he would trust her in turn. Maybe then, when she recovered, she would have a better chance at escaping.

She glanced back to see Jon’s eyes still on her, watching her work all of this through in her mind. He flashed her half a smile, shaking his head at her rigidity. Dany’s face was a mask of cool detachment, but she felt her resolve weakening, her desire for warmth overcoming her uneasiness. She scooted back in the saddle, grunting in pain as the arrow protruding from her thigh bumped Jon’s knee.

“You’re alright,” he reassured her as she leaned reluctantly against his chest, tucking her head up under his chin. The warmth of his neck soothed her wind-burned cheek and she was close enough to feel his heartbeat.

The relief was instantaneous as Dany stopped shaking, her breathing slowed, and she felt calm, almost safe. She wasn’t sure if she was growing faint from blood loss or simply getting warm and comfortable enough for weariness to take over at last, but the throbbing pain in her thigh seemed more manageable now, and Dany found to her surprise that she was sleepy. Her eyes fluttered and her head kept tipping down until her chin was at her chest.

Jon saw her dozing and she felt him chuckle quietly, but she was too exhausted to be embarrassed. “Don’t fall asleep just yet. We’re here.” His breath tickled at her ear as he spoke, coaxing her into awareness. She blinked around and saw that they had indeed arrived at a small log cabin. From what Dany could tell the whole structure was made up of only one, small room. The thatched roof was coated with the latest snowfall and a foot or two of fresh powder had collected at the doorway.

Jon swung down from the horse and Dany immediately lamented his departure as the full force of the cold assaulted her without the heat of his body close by. He tethered his horse to a wooden post and strode over to the cabin. Kicking aside the pile of snow that rested against the doorway, Jon cursed under his breath and fumbled with the latch. After a moment he unfastened it, propping the creaky door open with a pail.

Dany watched him as he strode about, sizing him up for the first time. Without the big, shaggy cloak that now rested on her own shoulders, Jon Snow looked younger, though the beard on his face told her that he was at least a man grown. He had thick black hair but his curls were boyish and sweet,
altogether unlike the fearsome black braids of dothraki men. At his hip, Dany could see a finely crafted sword. The hilt was adorned with a carved direwolf head, one that bore striking similarities to Jon’s own wolf, Ghost. Even her untrained eyes could see that it was a formidable weapon. She wondered if he really knew how to wield it.

When Jon returned to the horse he reached up to help her down. Dany let him place one arm around her torso and another carefully around her legs. Mindful of her essentially useless right leg he refrained from setting her on her feet, instead cradling her gently after he lifted her from the saddle. She hated having to be carried around like a child, and it was awkward having to cling to Jon for support. Their faces were so close that the steam of their breaths mingled together, and Dany could almost feel the tickle of Jon’s beard at her temple. It was more than a little too familiar for someone she’d just met.

Inside the tiny hut, she felt claustrophobic and anxious. She hadn't really been in so small a dwelling since she'd lived in dothraki tents, which brought back painful memories of other nights filled with blood and fear. She recalled the last time she’d been held this way, when Jorah had taken her out of the tent as the maegi performed blood magic on Drogo. The old knight’s arms had carried her to the place where she’d lost Rhaego, a place where all of her hopes and dreams had been snatched away in the space of an evening.

But this was a different time, a different place, and Dany commanded herself to be strong as Jon laid her gingerly down on the bed in the corner. He had told her that the cabin once belonged to a trapper, and the bed was covered with lush, soft furs. She settled into them and felt almost content if not for the persistent agony in her leg.

Dany swallowed her fear and revulsion and chanced a peek at the wound. It was ugly, still a bit swollen and still seeping blood. She could smell it, thick and coppery on the air. She was in a sorry state indeed. She took a shuddering breath and looked away to familiarize herself with her new surroundings instead.

The cabin was dark with only one, grubby window to let in the moonlight. The rushes on the floor were old but the walls seemed sturdy and well-maintained. All about the room were crates filled with tools for trapping and skinnning, and for cutting and drying hide into leather and furs. Near the bed was a wash basin and a stack of linens. Various cooking utensils hung on the wall beside the fireplace and an enormous bearskin rug was stretched out in front of the grate. Altogether Dany decided it was modest but cozy. Or as close to cozy as she could get for the time being.

Ghost padded silently around the space doing his own investigating, and Dany followed him with her eyes, marveling at his pristine fur, white as new-fallen snow. His eyes were strange, red as rubies and twice as bright. He was double the size of the biggest dog she’d ever seen back across the sea, and obviously far more intelligent. The big direwolf circled the cabin, sniffing inquisitively at the bear’s hide before finally collapsing onto it with a sigh.

"You need heat," Jon announced, rifling through a nearby crate and emerging with an axe. "I'll fetch some firewood. Will you be alright?"

Dany nodded at him from across the room and Jon turned on his heel and strode purposefully toward the door. She watched his retreating form, the black leather of his Night's Watch garb stretched taut over a broad, strong back. He would have no trouble chopping wood for their fire.

Even so, he was different from what she expected of a Brother of the Night's Watch. Dany’s readings of Westerosi history suggested that it had been a noble pursuit to join the Watch at its inception, but she knew that now things were different. The Wall was often the last resort for criminals and degenerates, but Jon seemed to be neither of these.
It occurred to Dany then that she was lucky. She'd been shot and abandoned to the elements, so fortune didn't seem to be on her side. But looking at Jon, she thought it a blessing that he had been the one to find her. So far he had been honest and gentle, something she knew to be a rarity after spending a lifetime among brutish men.

"Jon," she called out to him.

He lingered in the doorway, turning back to face her. "My lady?"

She suddenly felt silly, with the full force of his warm gaze on her. "Thank you. I just wanted to say thank you. For helping me."

Jon smirked, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck and averting his eyes. "Of course."

It was less than an hour before Jon had a fire crackling merrily in the grate and some fresh water in the basin for Dany to drink. She felt slightly refreshed and even a little hopeful as Jon transferred her carefully from the bed to the thick bear’s hide rug before the flames so that she could warm up faster.

“Is it too hot?” he asked, narrowing his eyes at the growing fire.

“Mmm, no. It’s perfect,” Dany responded, basking in the heated glow.

“All right,” he said, looking to the hideous leg wound. “I suppose we need to get that arrow out and dress the puncture.”

Dany took a deep breath, trying to push past her nerves at the prospect of such a procedure. She knew it would be painful, and she wondered whether Jon was really up to the task of tending to an injury such as this. There didn’t appear to be any useful medical equipment about. He had boiled the wine in his flask as well as some snow so they had hot water and wine nearby. He’d also torn the linens into strips with which to bind her leg after the arrow was removed. Dany didn’t want to tell Jon, but she was worried about even getting that far. How could a simple warrior of the Night’s Watch safely remove an arrow from a person?

Jon knelt on the floor beside her and Ghost sat a little ways behind him, watching with interest. “I don’t have Milk of the Poppy, or anything else for the pain,” he muttered. He handed her a wooden cooking spoon, not meeting her eyes. “You could try biting down on this.”

Dany accepted the spoon, cursing her shaking hand for betraying her fear. But she was afraid all the same. She was nearly sick with dread, thinking that she might meet her here. What would it all have been for, her long struggle, if she were to die in a grubby little shack in the middle of nowhere?

Jon's gaze fell upon her shaking hands and the anxious furrow of her brow. He reached out as if to take her hand but stopped short and pulled back, clearing his throat. “It will be alright,” he said, barely sounding certain himself. “Don’t be afraid.”

“I’m not afraid,” Dany insisted stubbornly, turning her face to the fire. She’d been through pain, worse pain than she’d ever thought she could endure. She knew there were things that hurt worse than any wound ever could. She’d weathered losing the last living family she had. Had watched Viserys murdered right before her eyes. She’d held Drogo as he took his last breath. Even the unimaginable pain of losing a child had been Dany’s to suffer. She would see this through, too. “Let’s just get it over with.”
“Fine.” Jon began getting things in order. He moved the pails of water and wine from near the fire over to where he was situated at Dany’s side, and stretched out the linen strips along the rug. “Are you ready?”

She nodded solemnly, never turning away from the flames. She focused on them, on the red light and its warmth, drawing strength from the notion that if nothing else, the fire couldn’t harm her. She had power and strength that no one else possessed. She was a Targaryen. She wouldn’t be conquered by a Harpy’s bow.

But then Jon’s hands closed around the arrow, and Dany saw white. He didn’t pull hard, presumably worried about harming her; but his hesitation only made things worse as the arrow merely budged, moving only a fraction of an inch. But even that small progress was tortuous, and Dany writhed in pain, stifling a cry as the arrow’s head dragged through her flesh.

“Y—you’ll need to be still,” Jon stammered at her, releasing the arrow and sitting back.

Dany turned on him with rage in her eyes. “Be still? It’s a bit difficult with you wiggling an arrow around in my leg. You’ll never get it out at that rate, and it hurts.”

Jon scowled at her and crossed his arms. “I’ve been shot with arrows myself. Three, actually. I know it hurts. I also know enough to tell that this one’s bad. It’s in deep, and your leg’s all swollen tight around it. I’m going to have to pull it hard and straight. If you move, it’ll just shift it around more. We need it to come out straight so it doesn’t do more damage.”

She sighed, tears of pain and frustration burning her eyes. “I know. I’ll be still.” She looked down at her leg in spite of herself and saw that Jon’s disturbance of the arrow had caused it to bleed anew, slowly soaking the rug with blood.

“I think I’ll be able to see things better without this in the way,” Jon observed, indicating the bloodied and torn skirt of her dress.

“Do what you must.”

He nodded and pulled a knife from his boot, slicing the garment up and around the arrow. Dany wore white breeches underneath and Jon meticulously cut a slit in them as well, tearing the fabric free so that the flesh of her swollen thigh was exposed. The arrow was high, almost to her hip, forcing Jon to tear her clothes away up to her smalls. She saw him redden, and it wasn’t an entirely foolish reaction, with his face bent close to examine a wound so near her intimate bits. But Dany had left her shame behind with Drogo’s khalasar, and was too preoccupied to worry about decency now.

She’d lost so much blood before, how could she stand to lose more? Already she could feel the effects. The ceiling of the hut seemed to spin in circles overhead, and when Dany turned back to Jon there were two of him. His pale face was creased with concern as he bent over her. “I know you’re frightened,” he said. He sounded very far away. “It will be alright. I’m going to fix it.” He was trying to reassure her, but to Dany it sounded as though she were deep underwater and Jon was mumbling from the surface. She blinked, her sight going fuzzy with the action.

He reached for the arrow again and yanked it hard and fast. Even in her hazy state of half-waking, Dany could feel the shock of agony that came with Jon’s pull. But instead of sliding free, the arrow shifted a bit and then stuck in place. She failed to suppress a tormented cry as her whole body scooted on the rug with the force of Jon’s tug on the arrow.

“Gods, there’s a lot of blood.” He sounded so distant now that Dany wasn’t even sure she’d heard him correctly. She couldn’t see anymore, could only feel the pain. It engulfed her entire leg, hot,
sharp, and insistent.

“I can’t die here,” she croaked desperately, reaching out for nothing in particular. She thought wildly of all that she’d left undone. She thought of Drogon, flying aimlessly around the North of Westeros in the blistering cold, of Viserion and Rhaegal left to rot beneath the pyramid forever. She thought of Tyrion and Missandei trying to hold Meereen together, of Grey Worm recovering from wounds he’d sustained protecting her city. She thought of Daario’s hands and how they’d never touch her heated skin again. Jorah’s kind eyes and encouraging words. She wouldn’t need his guidance anymore.

Dany remembered the scores of slaves she’d freed, only to go back under the slaver’s whip at her death. She thought of the kingdoms that still suffered under a usurper’s rule. Of her family slaughtered by a usurper’s henchmen. It was so unfair, so unjust. She wasn’t finished yet. *She wasn’t finished.*

“I’m sorry,” she heard someone sob from the darkness. He sounded very sad.

“Can’t die,” she whispered again. “Not here. I’m the last dragon.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Drop me a comment if you liked it :D
Hi guys! I've got a long chapter for you tonight. I hope you like it and aren't bored just yet! I swear this entire story won't ALL be in just a cabin haha. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” Jon repeated his apology like a mantra as the wounded girl, whispering nonsense about dragons and begging for her life, went limp in his arms.

It was horrible, a bloody disaster, and she was dying. She was falling in and out of consciousness as she lay there on the rug, and he couldn’t do anything about it.

Help, Jon thought desperately. I need to get help.

The girl had made it clear that she didn’t want anyone else to know about her and he was loathe to betray her trust, but that would hardly matter if she died. And besides, the one person he thought could help her was also the one person Jon trusted most.

He frantically rummaged through the cabin until he found a rag to wipe the blood from his gloves. Luckily, the rest of his black Night’s Watch garb was dark enough to hide the girl’s blood on his chest. He couldn’t very well return to the castle looking like he’d recently killed someone without raising alarm.

Jon grabbed one of the furs that had adorned the bed and draped it over the girl, hoping to provide her with at least some warmth.

“Ghost,” he called, surprised at the tremor in his voice. “Stay here. Stay with her.”

Hold on, Jon thought, casting a last, lingering look at the girl before sprinting out the door.
Back at the castle, the morning sun was just beginning to rise, casting everything in a soft glow. Jon found Sam in the rookery receiving ravens, removing the little letters from their ankles and then setting the birds on their perches to rest.

“Good morning, Jon,” Sam greeted him brightly. He shoved the letters in his pocket and wiped his hands on his trousers. “Have you had breakfast yet? I’m just on my way there now. I think Gilly’s helped Hobb today. I can smell fresh sweet buns.”

“No breakfast, Sam. I need your help,” Jon said, urgency lending his voice an edge he didn’t intend. Sam stiffened and opened his mouth to ask more, but Jon waylaid him. “I need you to go to Maester Aemon’s old chambers and fetch everything you can carry that will treat an arrow wound. Do you understand?”


“There’s no time to explain. Just gather what we need, Sam. Quickly!”

“Alright, alright,” Sam grumbled, and hurried away to collect supplies.

Jon watched him go, already feeling a little better now that he had Sam to help him. The brisk morning air worked to clear his mind as Jon considered his next move, but he was distracted by a smell on the breeze. The hot breakfast Sam had been anticipating so eagerly had a pleasant aroma that made Jon’s mouth water. It was only then he realized that if he was hungry, the girl back in the cabin was probably famished. “Wait,” he called.

Sam stopped and turned, looking harried. “Yes, Jon?”

“Fetch some food, too. Plenty of it. Those sweet buns you mentioned, whatever you can get.”

Sam nodded and headed off in the direction of the maester’s quarters.

Jon went the other way, and was nearly to the stables to ready a horse for Sam when he ran into Ser Alliser Thorne. The taller man frowned nastily and glared at Jon with his beady eyes. “Where’s the fire, Lord Snow?”

Jon frowned, forcing his fists, which had clenched the moment the man had intercepted him, to uncurl.

“Olly didn’t find you in your chambers this morning. Trouble with your Wildling friends?” Alliser did nothing to hide his suspicion, his eyes lingering a moment too long on Jon’s face.

“No, Ser,” Jon said, willing his voice into an even, polite tone. “Everything’s fine. I’m merely going on patrol.” He nodded to Alliser and pushed past him, making his way to the stables.

Mercifully, the stables were left unattended at such an early hour and Jon was able to avoid any other interruptions. As the horses had already been fed, the stable hand must have gone to breakfast himself. Jon gave his stallion an apologetic pat on the neck and led the horse out of the stall where he’d been enjoying some hay and water. He hastily slung some tack on a big, chestnut garron for Sam, and was buckling the bridle when Sam arrived, puffing with exertion.

“Here,” Sam said breathlessly, shoving a pack filled with medical supplies at Jon. “Now can you tell me what’s going on?”

“In a moment,” Jon assured him, handing him the reins to the garron and securing the supply pack to his own horse. “We need to move quickly and try to be discreet. I don’t want to spend any more time
“Wait,” Sam protested, taking a step back. “If we’re going somewhere far, I should tell Gilly. She’ll worry. She—”

“Of course,” Jon interrupted, struck with an idea. “Didn’t you say she was good at stitching?”

“Gilly? Oh, yes! She’s got very small, precise—”

“Great,” Jon cut in. “Go and fetch her, Sam. And hurry.”

Sam frowned but obeyed. Jon decided against outfitting a third horse for Gilly, unwilling to have to explain three missing horses on an unscheduled outing. Gilly could ride double with him. He’d just have to remember to give his poor, overworked stallion an extra helping of feed tonight.

When Sam returned with Gilly in tow, Jon waved her over. “You’ll ride with me. Is that alright?”

“Well . . . Yes, I think so. What’s happening?” She turned to Sam curiously. “I’ve asked Edd to look after Little Sam for the morning but he didn’t seem very happy about it. How long will we be?”

“Don’t ask me, ask him!” Sam pointed to Jon.

Jon massaged his temples and took a breath, gathering his patience. “Someone’s hurt and I need the two of you to help me. In secret.”

“I don’t rightly know myself,” Jon admitted, mounting his horse and reaching down to help Gilly up behind him. “If the men posted at the gate ask, we’re escorting Gilly to town so she can buy . . . something. I don’t know, material to make clothes for Little Sam. Special ingredients for the kitchens. Got it?”

Sam clambered clumsily onto his own horse and nodded once he was situated.

“Right, just follow me,” Jon commanded. They exited the castle gates at a walk, Jon doing his best to seem nonchalant but feeling acutely the eyes of the guards upon him. They bowed their heads as he passed, but said nothing to the Lord Commander and his companions as they made their way down the road and out of sight.

Jon was restless in the saddle, and it was all he could do not to gallop right to the girl’s side. But the snow underfoot was loose, and riding double he didn’t want to push his horse too hard. So they went along at a trot, their journey uneventful and interrupted only by Sam’s usual, compulsive, silence-filling chatter.

“It’s getting cloudy again. Bet we’ll get more snow before the day is out.”

“Oh! Look at that bird! Not often you see a cardinal this far North.”

“How much further? Fancy taking a break to eat one of those sweet buns?”

But no matter how much Sam prattled on, Jon was too lost in his own thoughts to engage him. He kept wondering what they would find back inside the cabin. Has the girl woken up? Will she be frightened or angry? Or worse . . . dead?

When they neared the hut, Sam chimed in from behind Jon once again. “This is the trapper’s house, isn’t it? What was his name? Dirk? I thought he died.”
“He did,” Jon confirmed, dismounting and then helping Gilly down from the saddle. “So he won’t be needing his hut. It was the closest shelter I could find.”

Jon proceeded inside first, beckoning Sam and Gilly to follow. The fire had been reduced to glowing embers in the grate and the girl still lay motionless, her eyes closed. Ghost was curled up beside her on the rug, his chin resting on her torso. Jon saw with relief that her chest rose and fell, however feebly; she was still breathing, still alive.

“We’re not too late,” Jon observed. “Gilly, heat that water and wine for me.” He indicated the pails on the floor from before. “Sam, she’s got an arrow lodged in her thigh. It’s deep. I tried to take it out and . . .”

Sam swallowed nervously. “And?”

“I think I only hurt her. She bled a lot.”

Sam walked over and lifted the fur blanket away to reveal the bloody wound. “It’s very serious,” he gasped, eyeing the puddle of congealing blood anxiously. “She might die, Jon.”

“No,” Jon replied with a shake of his head. “We’re going to save her. What have you brought?” He handed the pack to Sam, who accepted it with shaking hands and emptied it on the rickety wooden table. Ghost looked up at clatter and rose to give them space to work, moving quietly to sit sentinel near the door.

“I’ve read a bit about treating this sort of thing. I brought Milk of the Poppy, though I suppose we won’t be needing it,” Sam explained, gesturing to the unmoving girl. “The main concerns are blood loss and corruption, of course. So I’ve got a tourniquet, some herbs and oils for swelling. Some bandages, too. A needle and things for stitching.

Jon nodded uncertainly. “It will have to be enough.”

Gilly walked over and dropped to her knees beside the girl. “It’s awful,” she remarked, glancing at the wound. “Sam said you want me to stitch it?”

“After I’ve got the arrow out, of course.”

“That will be tricky. It’s deep and obviously you’ve had some trouble just pulling it out. But I think that actually cutting her to remove it, like surgery . . . that might be too much of a shock for her body to take right now.” Sam reasoned, looking helpless and distraught as he stared at the girl’s still form.

“So? We just leave the arrow inside her?” Jon demanded.

“Well, no. Then infection would set in and probably kill her,” Sam answered sheepishly.

Jon sighed and sat heavily on the bed in the corner, his head in his hands.

“Who is she?” Sam asked, squinting down at the girl’s face with interest. “You seem awfully worried about her, Jon.”

“You seem awfully worried about her, Jon.”

“Of course I’m worried. You said she might die.”

“Well, yes. But why do you . . . care so much? Who is she to you?” Sam pressed.

“I don’t even know her name,” Jon admitted. “I just found her out in the woods last night. Ghost heard something and led me to her. She wouldn’t tell me much of anything.” The beginnings of a
smile played across his mouth at the memory of her stubborn defiance. “She was pretty rude about it, actually.”

“She’s beautiful,” Gilly observed, brushing the girl’s hair out of her face with gentle fingers.

Jon followed the motion, his gaze resting on her closed eyes, the graceful curve of her lips. “Yes,” he agreed, his voice barely a whisper. “She is.”

“Well that explains it then,” Sam chuckled. “Did you save her because you fancy her, Jon?” His eyes twinkled mirthfully.

Jon turned away to hide his reddening cheeks “Don’t be ridiculous Sam. This is serious.”

Sam’s expression sobered a little and when he spoke again, his voice was oddly hard. “I know. It must be, for you to go to all this trouble to help a pretty girl. I seem to remember that the last time I wanted to help a girl in need, you refused and thought I was a fool.” He looked pointedly at Gilly.

“This isn’t the same at all,” Jon insisted, crossing his arms uncomfortably. “Gilly wasn’t dying alone in the woods. I wouldn’t leave an innocent person to die, Sam!” And he wouldn’t, but even as the words left his mouth, Jon felt a pang of guilt. Sam was right—when they’d first met Gilly at Craster’s, Jon had been too wary of upsetting Craster and endangering the Watch to step in.

But if this girl did indeed have people after her as she had suggested, wasn’t Jon putting himself and his brothers in harm’s way by helping her when he knew nothing about her? She was already pulling him away from his duties. At that very moment there were letters to be read and answered, supply orders to be approved, and training to oversee. Instead, Jon was in a cabin in the woods fretting over the health of a complete stranger. He glanced at Sam, who was still scowling, and could think of nothing more to say.

“You helped us when it counted, Jon,” Gilly interjected, shooting Sam a disapproving glare.

Sam bowed his head sheepishly and after a moment he relented. “You’re right. I’m glad you found her. Really, I am. She does need help. I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for,” Jon assured him. “Let’s get to it.”

Sam nodded and joined Gilly at the girl’s side. “Jon, grab one of those to prop her leg up, so the blood flows away from the wound,” he explained, gesturing to one of the wooden crates lining the walls.

Jon stepped over to the nearest crate, one filled with finished furs, folded neatly. He dragged it over near the others and Gilly lifted the girl’s ankle, resting it on the lip of the crate to that her leg was elevated.

“Good, now for the tourniquet.” Sam grabbed the brown leather strap, reaching under the girl’s thigh with shaking hands and looping it around. He pulled it taut and secured the buckle, fumbling all the while. He seemed determined to look anywhere except at the strap itself, situated at the very top of the girl’s thigh. Jon saw Gilly watching Sam’s embarrassment, her hand over her mouth to hide her amusement.

“Alright, Jon. You’re stronger than I am,” Sam announced when he’d finished, waving Jon over. “You’ll come here and pull while Gilly and I brace her.”

Jon obeyed, looking nervously at Sam as he made ready to pull the arrow from the girl’s leg again. He couldn’t help remembering the disaster that was his last attempt, her hands clutching weakly at
the front of his jerkin and her eyes losing focus. Jon had been convinced she was dying, and it was all because he had been unable to help her. Just another life he was responsible for, another life lost. You certainly can’t help her thinking like that, he chastised himself, shaking his head to clear it.

Sam placed his hands on the girl’s pale arm while Gilly held the girl’s leg below the wound. Jon arranged his own hands on the shaft of the arrow, grasping it as tight as he dared without snapping the wood. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Sam give him a nod of encouragement. Now or never.

Taking a deep breath, Jon pulled with the full force of his strength. There was a moment of resistance before it came tearing free, leaving a trail of destruction in its path as the wound seeped blood anew; but Sam’s measures had helped, and Jon was relieved to see that the blood flow wasn’t nearly as thick as before. Sam moved fast, stopping up the opening with a bundle of cloth and pouring hot wine over it.

The girl’s face twitched but she didn’t wake, and Jon was grateful for that. He imagined the pain was extraordinary. It had been when Maester Aemon had plucked the arrows from his own hide, back when Ygritte had shot him full of them years before. But Ygritte had missed the most vital spots because she hadn’t been shooting to kill. Jon’s own wounds hadn’t been this deep and hadn’t torn up his muscles like this arrow had done to the poor, unconscious girl.

“Okay,” Sam said, a quaver of anxiety in his voice as he looked over to Gilly. “I need you to stitch this closed now. I’ll try to hold the skin together while you work.”

Gilly nodded and set to it with the needle and thread Sam provided, somehow managing to sew quickly and precisely despite the slippery surface created by blood and wine around the wound.

Jon tried not to watch. He didn’t want to add to the pressure Gilly no doubt already felt as she worked. Instead, he looked down at the arrow in his hands. There were hardly any feathers on the end anymore, worn away during the girl’s struggle. The arrowhead was caked with blood but still Jon could see its cruel, barbed shape that was responsible for the difficulty in removing it. He had never seen such an arrow before, only adding to the mystery of what had happened to the girl and where she’d come from.

When Gilly was finished she stood on shaky legs and walked over to the bucket of hot water where she submerged her bloodstained hands up to the wrist.

“That’s fine work, Gilly,” Sam remarked, examining the stitching.

“Thank you.” She smiled, hesitantly proud, and Jon nodded his thanks. He knew that his own hands, scarred from war and work, would not have done so well.

“What next?” he asked, gazing down at the girl’s face and watching for signs of life. He couldn’t help but wonder if she would ever wake. She hadn’t so much as twitched throughout the whole ordeal of dressing her wound. If that hadn’t roused her, would anything? Were their efforts to save her all for naught?

“I’ll make a poultice to go under the bandage,” Sam explained. “It should help with the swelling. Now that the wound’s closed up, hopefully she’ll regain some of her strength. It’s hard to say, though. She’s lost so much blood.”

“What do we do about that?” Jon really didn’t have a clue. He had suffered his fair share of injuries in his life, so ordinarily he was on the other side of things. He flexed the scarred fingers of his right hand, still stiff from the burns he’d gotten from killing his first wight many years ago. If it hadn’t been for Maester Aemon, he may never have held a sword again.
“First we should make certain she stays warm,” Sam instructed, as he carefully applied some ground herbs and a potent-smelling oil to the newly-closed wound.

“I’ll build the fire back up,” Jon offered, eager to make himself useful. He had chopped more than enough wood the night before, and still had a decent little pile near the doorway. Selecting a few logs, Jon set them in the grate and stoked the fire idly as Sam and Gilly busied themselves behind him.

Sam removed the tourniquet and bound the wound with a bandage while Gilly melted some fresh snow into hot water to clean the dirt and blood that still clung to the girl’s face and neck.

“To help her heal, we also have to keep her nourished,” Sam went on. “That’ll be the worst trouble—how long she stays out. She can only last a few days without food and drink, and we can’t provide that until she can swallow on her own.”

“She’ll wake up,” Gilly said confidently, dabbing at the girl’s forehead with a rag. “She’s strong.”

“She’s got a strange look, hasn’t she?” Sam’s eyes were on the girl’s face, watching as Gilly carefully wiped it clean. He pointed to the pale, shining locks of her hair. “Her hair . . . it’s almost white. And what she’s wearing is peculiar. Like she isn’t from around here. Definitely not in suitable dress for a place as cold as this.”

“She claims she flew here.” Jon rubbed thoughtfully at the back of his neck, remembering his conversation from the night before. “Acted shocked when I mentioned The Wall, like she had no idea where we were. I think she was just a bit off from being hurt, you know?”

“Maybe,” Sam said. But his features were screwed up in a stern expression that Jon had come to recognize as his thinking face. “What else did she say? Anything out of the ordinary, memorable?”

Jon scoffed at the question. She had said a lot of memorable things, alright. “She claimed she was a queen,” he recalled, shaking his head. “But it’s as I said—she wouldn’t tell me her name. She was afraid her ‘enemies’ might find her, and she was trying to get back home with someone named uh . . . Drogon?”

Sam turned to face Jon, his eyes wide. “Drogon. That sounds a bit like ‘dragon,’ doesn’t it?”

“What? No.” But the comment reminded Jon of what the girl had said in those last feverish moments before she’d lost consciousness. *I’m the last dragon.*

“But she did say . . . she called herself ‘the last dragon’ right before she went out.” Jon shrugged.

Sam gasped, leaning close to the girl’s face. He carefully pulled back one of her eyelids and studied her eye for a moment.

“What are you doing?” Jon hunched over Sam’s shoulder curiously.

“I was looking at her eyes,” Sam replied, beaming. “They’re violet, just as I suspected. Jon, I think I know who she is! It all makes sense now.” Sam got to his feet, practically bouncing with excitement. He turned to a very confused Jon, grabbing him firmly by the shoulders. “This girl—it’s her. This is Daenerys Targaryen!”

For a few, tense seconds there was total silence aside from the crackling of the fire in the grate, as Jon gaped at Sam in disbelief. Gilly ceased cleaning the girl’s face, looking questioningly at them both.
“Targaryen?” she asked. “Like Maester Aemon?”

“Exactly like Maester Aemon,” Sam squealed.

“No. No, it can’t be,” Jon objected, his mind racing, trying to make sense of it. The last he had heard of Daenerys Targaryen, she was queen of Meereen all the way across the sea, some untouchable legend of a monarch who commanded dragons and armies. But what Maester Aemon had said about her still stuck in Jon’s mind. *A Targaryen alone in the world is a terrible thing.*

Jon had felt an inexplicable sadness in that moment, thinking of the young queen, a woman who’d never known her own parents or the seat of power they had once occupied in Westeros, a woman who was the last of her siblings to survive. If the stories were true, she had come from humble beginnings, like him, and had risen to lead people and armies. But also like Jon, she was, in many ways, alone.

As he studied the girl’s face, Jon realized the pieces of the puzzle all fit. Her features that had seemed so striking to him, now made sense—her hair and eyes were characteristic of the Targaryen line. But it wasn’t just her appearance. The sound of *flapping wings* he had heard from up on The Wall, the scene of destruction in the forest, and the girl’s seemingly delusional comments about royalty, flying, and dragons all supported Sam’s claim.

Even then it was difficult for Jon to accept, because accepting it meant accepting that a *dragon* had flown a young woman across the sea from Essos and had deposited her in the forest right next to Castle Black. It meant that somewhere out there, a dragon (Drogon?) was flying around, waiting for the chance to return to his master, just as the girl—Daenerys—had insisted he would. The very idea thrilled Jon as much as it terrified him.

Later, after they’d all helped themselves to a hasty and silent meal of sweet buns and boiled eggs, Jon did his best to make sure that Daenerys was fed as well. Sam and Gilly held her upright while he clumsily poured water and mulled wine into her mouth in tiny amounts, tipping her head back and praying that for every bit that dribbled down her chin, more was going down her throat. They could think of no other way to keep her hydrated and fed until she regained consciousness.

But Jon felt unsettled by it all now their charge was more than likely the Targaryen queen. It seemed wildly inappropriate that he had carried a queen in his arms, and had seen her smallclothes with his own eyes. Even now, watching droplets of wine roll off her lips to further stain her once-white gown felt like a violation of her dignity. But whether she was queen or commoner, Jon still resolved to do all he could to save her.

“Alright,” Sam sighed when they had finally emptied the contents of a wineskin. “That will have to suffice for now.” He removed a handkerchief from his waistcoat and handed it to Gilly, who attempted to mop up the spilled liquid from Daenerys’s neck and chest.

“We should be getting back,” Jon agreed, scooping the frail girl up in his arms again and walking her over to the bed in the corner of the room. He laid her down gently, arranging her arms at her sides and tucking her in with thick furs. Regarding her there, Jon decided that she seemed to look better. The only blood remaining was that which stained her clothes. Her skin, almost blue with cold before,
now looked healthier, as though the color might soon return to her cheeks.

“I’ll stay here with her until tomorrow,” Gilly said, picking up the mess of medical supplies and soiled cloths scattered about the floor in front of the fireplace.

“I think that’s best. Sam’s or my absence will be noted, but someone should probably be here, at least until she wakes up.” It wasn’t that Jon thought the girl was in any particular danger out here. The cabin was relatively well hidden and only members of the Watch were aware of its location now. But for some reason it tore at his heart to think of Daenerys, if that really was her name, waking up alone, cold and confused in a foreign land.

Gilly walked over to Sam and embraced him. “Be sure to take good care of Little Sam,” she ordered. “He’ll sleep in your room.”

“Of course,” Sam promised.

“Thank you, Gilly,” Jon said, inclining his head to her, grateful. “I’ll leave Ghost here to protect you, too.” He patted his direwolf on the head and moved to join Sam in the doorway, resisting the urge to look back over his shoulder and check on the girl one more time.

The next few days were busy ones for Jon. The onset of Winter meant less crops, which meant less provisions for the Watch. The wars in the South and the Wildling occupation increased the shortage tenfold, and Jon was stretched thin thinking of ways to keep everyone fed, safe, and at peace with one another.

Each day he met with Tormund to discuss the needs of the Free Folk, and each day he had to bring their requests before his brothers and negotiate their terms. He found himself writing to lords he’d never heard of, much less met, begging for offerings of food instead of fresh recruits. Even this was a great sacrifice, for Jon knew what awaited them beyond The Wall, and men had never seemed more necessary.

So there couldn’t have been a more inconvenient time for Jon to have another new responsibility in the form of Daenerys Targaryen. But that did nothing to stop his mind from being constantly preoccupied with worry for the girl.

Every day Jon made flimsy excuses and slipped away around noon while his brothers had their lunch, riding hard to the cabin in the forest.

On the very first day, Gilly asked to return to Castle Black. “I need to see to Little Sam,” she insisted. “Sam can only manage it for so long.”

She was right, of course. So Jon made a compromise and brought the little boy and his things along the next day so that he could stay with Gilly. Sam had protested fiercely, insisting that he should be the one to do it, because he wanted to visit Gilly. But Jon reminded him of letters that needed sorting and sending, and that put an end to the matter.

With her child by her side, Gilly was more than content to take care of Daenerys. And each day Jon checked in on them, bringing them fresh provisions and firewood. He set Ghost free to hunt while he
had his own lunch with Gilly, Little Sam blabbering happily in her lap.

Afterward, Jon assisted Gilly as they clumsily poured ale—or on a particularly good day, Hobb’s onion soup—into Daenerys’s mouth. Neither of them knew if it was doing any good, but Jon took solace in the fact that the girl’s skin was no longer icy to his touch, and that her breath seemed stronger than it had before.

Jon tried to be hopeful, but by the fifth day his fears were nearly unbearable. He and Gilly could only feed the girl so much. She was dehydrated and weak while her body was trying to heal from a devastating shock. Jon knew that they had one, maybe two days until Daenerys would likely die of thirst.

He had always been softhearted, and his sensibilities caused him to worry about any person who was under his protection. But the possibility that the girl he had discovered really was Daenerys Targaryen—that a woman as significant and formidable as the Dragon Queen could be on the edge of death while in his care—made him feel like there was something he should be doing. If she was in fact the Queen of Meereen, then she was right to keep her identity a secret. Most of the inhabitants of Westeros would happily sell her freedom and safety to the highest bidder. Keeping her hidden seemed of paramount importance. Even so, Jon felt useless spending most of his time in the castle when he could be helping her.

He had a full itinerary of meetings and duties that day, but still he found himself distracted by thoughts of Daenerys. What if she was awake, and Jon was stuck here walking the battlements with Lord Davos Seaworth instead of talking to her, confirming the truth of her identity? If she actually was a Targaryen, how should he proceed?

Jon didn’t have the prejudiced resentment for Targaryens that he had witnessed in so many Westerosi since the Mad King fell. On the contrary, he was fascinated by them. As a boy, Jon had read the histories of the Targaryen rulers and conquerors and longed to be like them. Like Maester Aemon’s own brother—“Aegon the Unlikely”—who had risen to power despite being the fourth born son. Even Maester Aemon himself, the only Targaryen Jon had ever known, was a great and honorable man. But as a child, Jon’s favorite had always been Daeron I, the Young Dragon, who led armies and conquered Dorne. Jon had dreamt of seeing a dragon, having one of his own. With a dragon, no one would dismiss or belittle him as they had when he was young. With a dragon, even a bastard could fly.

So Jon was anxious to return to the girl’s side, to see if she was awake and talk to her, to learn more about where she’d come from and what she meant to do. But for the moment his responsibilities came first, and he tried to listen intently as Davos relayed the early reports from Stannis’s campaign to the South. Apparently, the army was currently camped a few miles from Winterfell, waiting for favorable weather.

“He will persevere, my lord,” Davos declared, confident as always in his would-be king.

Jon made no reply, staring southward but seeing nothing. It was snowing again, and before them there was only a cloud of whiteness as far as the eye could see.

“And when he does,” Davos continued. “Your family’s home will be restored to Lady Sansa.”

“Aye. Sansa deserves it. There must always be a Stark in Winterfell,” Jon recited the old adage solemnly. “But I’m not counting on your liege ousting the Boltons. I lived in that castle. It’s very defensible, and the Boltons have a formidable army. They fought alongside my brother, before they betrayed him.”
“His Grace is the greatest military strategist in the Seven Kingdoms,” Davos reasoned.

“That doesn’t ensure his victory,” Jon rejoined seriously.

“Then why didn’t you join him? Add your Wildling force to his army?”

Jon turned to Davos, Maester Aemon’s advice from long ago still fresh in his mind. “I’m a man of the Night’s Watch. My duty is to the realm, not my family. And a man must do his duty. I’m needed here.” Jon’s face was impassive, but even as he uttered the words, he felt traitorous. Who was he to speak of duty as he planned another escape, anticipating his next trip to the cabin?

His meeting with Davos concluded, made a stop at the kitchens. He had Hobb stir some honey into a flagon of fresh milk, the richest beverage he could think of.

“Not like you to have a sweet tooth, Jon,” Hobb observed.

“It is today.” Jon scooted by Hobb to the cooling rack, gathering some meat pies fresh from the oven into his satchel.

“Those need to feed the whole castle,” the old cook said warily.

“And they shall.” Jon forced a pleasant smile and slipped from the kitchens, careful to avoid Sam. Today he wasn’t going to bother with excuses or arguing. He was going.

The snowfall started to let up on his ride to the cabin, clearing his way. Jon took it for a good omen, as though the forest beckoned him toward his destination. When he arrived at the hut, Gilly was grateful for the company and accepted the food with eager hands. Little Sam smiled up at Jon from his usual spot on her hip, drooling lazily.

Ghost’s welcome wasn’t so warm. Five days of almost total captivity made the wolf antsy and the moment Jon opened the cabin door he sprung outside in a flash of white fur.

“He’s been bored,” Gilly sighed, frowning at Ghost’s retreating form.

“He’s keeping you all safe,” Jon said firmly. “That’s what matters.”

Gilly nodded and set Little Sam down on the table. “He can sit up on his own now,” she announced proudly, helping herself to a meat pie.

“He’s growing fast.” Jon held a finger out to Little Sam, who reached up and grabbed it in his tiny fist, cooing contentedly at the attention.

“He is,” Gilly agreed. “But I know what you really want to hear about. And I’m sorry to say there’s been no change.”

Jon carefully tugged his finger free of the baby’s grasp and approached the bed in the corner. Gilly had brushed out Daenerys’s lovely silver hair so that it laid smooth, shiny and clean. The swelling had gone down in her wounded leg, and Jon could see that it was freshly bandaged. Color had begun to bloom in her cheeks, though her face was gaunt, dark circles rimming her eyes. It looked like Gilly had removed her dress, tried to wash it, and put it back on again. There were still dark stains from blood and wine, but the unstained places no longer carried the dinge of dirt and sweat. All in all, the girl looked markedly better, incomparable to the sorry state she’d been in when Jon had found her.

“You’ve been busy. I really appreciate this,” Jon thanked Gilly. “If she ever . . . When she wakes up,
I know she’ll be grateful.”

“It’s nothing,” Gilly demurred, but Jon could see the faint, pleased smile on her lips.

“Well, I don’t know how much longer we should keep at this, but I brought something for her.” He retrieved the honeyed milk from his pack to show to Gilly.

“I think I can help her drink on my own now, if you like,” Gilly offered. “You should get back before the snow picks up.”

Jon gazed out the window and sighed. Already his brothers would be wondering at his absence. One or two days of running errands while the others supped might have gone unnoticed, but Jon had been at this for almost a week now. It was time for him to accept that Daenerys might not wake up, and turn his focus back to being Lord Commander. They had done what they could to help her, more than most people would have done. But it still pained him to fail again, to see another person die before he could help them.

Jon looked back to the girl and took one of her small hands in his own, watching the slight rise and fall of her chest as she breathed. He might never know the truth of it now, but looking down at her, it seemed impossible she was a queen. She was so tiny and so young. Far too young to die, though he knew that no one was safe from death. Not really. Jon wondered who had shot her, who had dared to kill a queen. Like Robb she had climbed too high, too fast, and it must have put a target on her back.

Jon could feel Gilly peering at him as he set the girl’s hand back down by her side.

“Goodbye,” he murmured, turning to leave.

But then she stirred, rustling the bedclothes, and Jon stepped back in alarm.

“What is it?” Gilly asked, rushing to his side.

Before Jon could answer, the girl’s eyes fluttered then opened wide. He had forgotten just how bright they were, as purple as amethysts, removing any doubt that they could belong to anyone other than a Targaryen. When she saw Jon and Gilly she sucked in a panicked breath, trying to sidle away from them toward the wall.

Without thinking, Jon reached out and laid his palm against the side of her face, staring into her eyes.

“Daenerys?”

She froze in shock at the sound of her name; it was obvious the secret she’d been guarding so carefully was now laid bare. After a moment, she composed herself and nodded.

“Do you know me?” Jon asked. Daenerys’s eyes focused on his and gradually she let out a breath, a slow smile alighting her features.

“How could I forget my hero?” she said, and though her voice was hoarse from lack of use he could still mark her teasing tone. “Jon Snow.”

Chapter End Notes
Thank you so much for reading! Drop me a comment if you liked it and have an awesome weekend!
Chapter Notes

Hi, everyone! So sorry for the wait on this chapter. I have been overwhelmed with work but I did my best to keep working on this story :) I hope you'll like it! I promise next week will finally see some time outside the cabin haha. Thanks so much for your continued support and kind words. I really love the Jonerys fandom so much <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ghost’s wet nose nudged Dany’s hand, waking her from her nap. She blinked groggily and sat up to see the wolf watching her with his inquisitive garnet eyes.

She smiled, reaching over to run her fingers through the thick fur between his ears. For a moment Ghost shut his eyes contentedly, leaning into her touch. But then he stepped back and turned toward the little table beside her bed.

“Oh, I see,” she murmured, shaking her head at him in disappointment. “Is this what you wanted all along?” Dany picked up the clay jug from the side table and peered inside at its contents. There was still some of the honeyed milk that Gilly had given her that morning. She took a drink, savoring the sweetness on her tongue and the coolness of the thick liquid down her sore, parched throat. She considered finishing it off but the piteous look on Ghost’s face convinced her otherwise.

“Want some?” she asked him, giggling at the slight wag of his bushy tail. Dany reached down and poured the remainder of the milk into Ghost’s dish, patting him on the head when he rose to devour his treat. She liked the big wolf and the air of safety he provided her. He was quiet and intelligent but she could see the strength of the muscles that rippled under his snow-white coat and the ferocity of his sharp claws and long fangs.

He was no dragon, but until Drogon returned to her, he was an able protector for Dany and her new caretaker, the girl called Gilly.

“I’ve never seen Ghost take to someone so quickly,” Gilly observed from over near the fireplace. “Most people are frightened of him. I was.”
Dany shrugged. “I’ve faced more fearsome things than he.”

Gilly shuddered as she lifted a pot of stew out of the fire and set it on the table. “You’re a brave lady.”

“When I have to be, I suppose,” Dany mused, her voice still weaker than she’d expected it would be. “Thank you, by the way. For this.” She held up the empty milk jug with a shaky hand before she hastily set it down on the floor near Ghost. It had been three days since she’d woken but her strength was slow to return. It frustrated her, being so dependent.

But Gilly didn’t seem to mind. The girl had mousy brown hair and a small frame, but she held her wide-eyed little boy with strong arms. In the few days Dany had known Gilly, she had watched her bustle about the little cabin with surprising efficiency and an unwaveringly positive attitude. Dany was wary of her, of course. She had to maintain a certain level of detachment and stay on her guard for her own safety. But she found that she liked the girl, despite this, and was very grateful for her help and attention.

With Gilly’s assistance she had managed to get up and limp about the cabin, using her legs for the first time in a week. It was discouraging how difficult it was, a sharp pain shooting up her injured leg every time she put weight on it. But Dany refused to show any evidence of the pain or worry on her face. She had to be strong.

She had made herself vulnerable before, had revealed too much. She cursed herself for slippin up and confirming her identity when Jon Snow had asked her before. But it was hard to toe the line between caution and coldness. For as much as Dany wanted to hide her secrets, she also needed help. She needed to get back home and she knew she couldn’t do it without the aid of her companions. She decided the best course of action was to strike up some semblance of a friendship with this Gilly.

“It’s Jon you should thank,” Gilly corrected, smiling at Dany from across the room. After a moment she cleared her throat and added in a small voice, “Your Grace.”

Dany’s eyes narrowed uncomfortably at Gilly’s use of her title. She didn’t want word of it spreading. And she felt anything but a queen laid up in a strange bed being attended by strange people. “You . . . don’t need to call me that, Gilly.”

“I’m sorry.” She picked her baby boy up from his seat at the table and approached Dany. “I don’t know what’s proper all the time. I haven’t had much learning.”

“It’s alright.” Dany offered her a reassuring smile. “What you said was correct. I just want to keep it a secret.”

“I won’t tell,” Gilly promised. “You can trust me. Jon trusts me.”

Dany considered that, eyeing the girl thoughtfully. “Yes, it would seem he does. Is Jon your . . . ? Is that his baby?”

Gilly looked at the child and then to Dany before laughing heartily. “Little Sam? No, of course not. Jon and I are . . . friends. I named him after his father, Sam, Jon’s friend.”

“Oh. I see.” Dany couldn’t help grinning at the baby, his tiny fists clinging to the front of Gilly’s dress to hold himself up. He stared at Dany with the unabashed wonder of a child. He was precious. Dany was reminded sharply of Rhaego, and she wondered again what he might have looked like. What sort of young man he would be growing into now.
“But Jon is good to us,” Gilly was saying. “And not just to us, but to all of the Free Folk.”

“The Free Folk? Do you mean people from North of the Wall? Wildlings?”

“Yes,” Gilly answered a little hesitantly. “Do you . . . disapprove?”

Dany found Gilly’s eyes, sitting up straighter despite the protesting ache in her leg. “No,” she proclaimed, shaking her head emphatically. “No one shall be banished from the safety of the realm simply because they had the misfortune of being born above the Wall. Not when I’m queen.”

Gilly grinned. “I can see why Jon likes you, Your Gr—. Sorry.”

The blood rushed to Dany’s cheeks at Gilly’s words. Jon? The dour Northern ranger liked her? She shouldn’t care. But she couldn’t help but feel intrigued at the thought. Her mind wandered to the last time she had seen him a couple of days prior.

The first thing Dany had laid eyes on when she’d awoken was Jon’s concerned face and the worry in his brown eyes. He was a serious young man, of that much she was certain. But when Dany had spoken, had shown them that she was alright, Jon’s face had lit up in a rare smile that she had found comforting amidst her pain and distress. He made her feel . . . secure, even though she knew she should feel otherwise.

“He likes me?” Dany scoffed, feigning amusement to try and disguise her interest.

Gilly came closer and sat at the foot of Dany’s bed, nodding eagerly. “He came to look after you nearly every single day that you were unconscious. He brought you food and water, chopped wood for your fire, and even helped feed you and dress your wound.”

Dany felt painfully self-conscious at the thought. For days she had been dead to the world while Jon had apparently tended to her. She wasn’t usually shy, but the thought of him looking at her or even touching her while she slept made her feel exactly that. She cleared her throat, collecting herself before she answered.

“It’s um, very generous of both of you. There must be an excess of men at the Night’s Watch for Jon to have had so much time on his hands.”

“Well, he doesn’t. Not really. Being the Lord Commander and all, he takes a risk coming here.”

“What?!” Dany questioned, astounded. Little Sam jumped at her startled exclamation and Ghost leapt to his feet, but Dany hardly noticed them, her thoughts a maelstrom in her head. She couldn’t believe it. The Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch was a position that even she knew was important, one of honor and a tremendous amount of responsibility.

“What does that mean exactly?”

“Well, I know there are a few different castles on The Wall,” Gilly began, trailing off in thought. “As Lord Commander, Jon’s in charge of them all, and of every man.”

“I see . . .” It seemed impossible for the position to be held by such a young and soft-spoken man as Jon Snow. And it seemed even more unlikely that someone with that level of responsibility would spend his days watching over her instead of tending to his duties at The Wall with his men.

“Yes,” Gilly confirmed, nodding at Dany’s shock. “Who else could afford to get you milk and honey out here in a place like this?” She chuckled, clearly amused, but Dany didn’t join in.
“I know it sounds strange,” Gilly went on. “But Jon is the Lord Commander. And he’s a really good one. He let the Free Folk come past The Wall. He’s protecting them instead of fighting them. No one has ever done that before.”

Dany’s eyes widened and she leaned in, keen to learn more. “Why did he do that?”

“Well, because of the White Walkers,” Gilly answered, as though it should be obvious.

“The what?”

Gilly tilted her head at Dany, bewildered, as Little Sam cooed restlessly in her arms. “The Others. Them that live up North of The Wall.”

Dany had no idea what Gilly was talking about but her description, however vague, sent a chill of dread down her spine.

“I’ve never heard of that before,” she whispered.

“Well, they’re coming,” Gilly said matter-of-factly. “And Jon knows it. That’s why he brought the Free Folk South.”

“That seems risky,” Dany observed. “Allowing your people through The Wall after thousands of years. I imagine plenty of his own men were opposed.”

“Yes. It’s been real difficult for him. I expect it’s why he hasn’t been back here once since you came to. He has lots to do.”

Dany sighed. She could relate all too well. She had a city on the brink of rebellion to return to herself. But traveling there seemed more and more impossible with every day that passed. She needed Drogon, and she had no idea where he had gone or if he was alright. She felt sure he hadn’t been found, or Gilly would have mentioned it. Even in a world with something called White Walkers, a dragon in Westeros again would be sensational. Everyone from the Lord Commander to the lowliest field hand would be discussing it. So she took solace that wherever Drogon was, he seemed to be hidden. She just hoped he would come back to her soon.

She need only recover in the meantime. She was well on her way thanks to Gilly and, amazingly, the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. She was a perfect stranger to both of them. And before they had realized her identity, she was also just a commoner in their eyes, someone who could not repay their altruism. It gave her hope to be reminded that people like Gilly and Jon existed, especially after witnessing the senseless carnage she had left behind in the fighting pits.

“Why are you doing this for me?” Dany asked as Gilly stood to finish preparing their lunch. “A queen I may be, but I have nothing to offer you here.”

Gilly set Little Sam back at the table before ladling broth from the pot into wooden bowls. She shrugged.

“Everyone needs a little help sometimes. I needed help before, like you. And Sam saved me, just like Jon saved you. We have to take care of each other to survive here.”

Dany lay back against her pillows. Looking at Gilly and Little Sam, she was overwhelmed with gratitude for the time and effort these strangers were investing in her care. It wasn’t the first time in her life that she had relied on the generosity of strangers, spending her childhood on the run as she had and surviving off of the good graces of Essosi men who purported to be loyal to her family. The beggar prince, they’d called her brother, and she, the beggar princess. But it didn’t make her any less
thankful for Gilly’s good heart.

Later that afternoon, Gilly and Little Sam set out for Castle Black, promising to return with clean clothes for Dany to wear. With only Ghost to keep her company, Dany decided to use the time to try and do something herself. After all, Gilly wouldn’t be able to assist her in the cabin forever.

The one thing she craved most was a bath. She didn’t have that option, of course. But she did have the next best thing. It took several wobbly, limping trips from the basin to the fireplace and back to prepare, but when Dany tested the water with her finger it was pleasantly hot. She sighed happily and dipped the cloth Gilly had left her into the water, wrung it out a bit, and wiped it over her bare arms, her chest, the back of her neck.

It was her first time taking care of herself alone since she’d been wounded. All things considered, Dany was doing a fine job of it. And while it was a difficult balancing act to stand at the basin, it felt lovely to cover her skin in warmth, almost like bathing back home in her great, copper tub. Almost. That luxury was hard to imagine here in the frozen woods. But the basin bath wasn’t terrible, and Dany was enjoying herself until the time came to clean her injured leg.

She was having a hard enough time with the rest of her body, forced to brace herself against the basin with one hand, doing everything she could to keep weight off of the hurt leg. Dany was trying to figure out how to loosen and remove the bandages on her thigh when a knock sounded at the door behind her.

Ghost rose immediately from where he’d been lying in her bed and bounded happily to greet their visitor.

That must be Gilly with my new clothes, she thought, smiling at the wolf’s excitement. That was quick.

Gilly had cleaned and dressed Dany more than once when she had been unconscious, so Dany saw no point in false modesty now. It was hard enough for her to undress and she had no intention of going through the whole process a second time when Gilly departed again.

“Come in,” she called over her shoulder, making no move to cover up.

She heard the creak of the door on its hinges, Ghost’s pants of joy, footfalls in the entryway, and then—

“Seven hells! I’m sorry! I . . . ”

Dany froze, the washrag dropping from her hand and hitting the floor with a wet smack. She turned slowly to face Jon, one hand maintaining her unsteady balance with a grip on the basin, the other thrown across her chest to provide a modicum of cover, however scant.

Over by the doorway, even the back of Jon’s head looked mortified, and she couldn’t help her snort of amusement.

“I thought you were Gilly,” she explained.

Jon sighed but didn’t turn around. “Even so, where are your clothes?”
“They’re just here,” Dany gestured toward her pile of still-bloodstained rags as though Jon could see them folded on the bed a few steps away. She let go of the basin and hobbled toward them, the pain in her leg still causing an awkward limp. She picked up her dingy, grey breeches, carefully attempting to hold them open so she could step into them while using her other hand to cling to the bed for balance.

Only a moment had passed before Jon called out to her impatiently. “Can I turn around now?”

“Yes,” Dany answered distractedly, finally getting one foot into the leg of her pants.

He turned, cursing when he saw her, still naked as her name day and now bent over, too.

“You’re still . . . you’re still bloody naked!” he sputtered.

Dany pulled the breeches part of the way up her leg and then tried to step into the other, wobbling precariously when she lifted her foot. She sighed at her inability to complete even this simple task quickly, her frustration growing.

“I’m aware,” she snapped through gritted teeth.

“Why did you say I could turn around then?!”

Dany swore under her breath and tried again to stand on her injured leg, to lift the other into the pants while holding them up with only one hand.

“I’m a bit preoccupied at the moment, or haven’t you noticed?” she asked, pausing to look up at him. When her eyes met his, Jon quickly shut them, his face an alarmingly bright red.

“And besides,” Dany added. “I’m sure this isn’t the first time you’ve seen a naked woman.”

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

“Well, I’m trying to put some clothes back on but it’s not so simple to stand on this useless, shaky leg.”

“Gods, just take this!” Jon exclaimed, yanking his cloak from his back and holding it out to her.

Dany straightened, stepping out of the troublesome breeches. Several steps away, Jon’s outstretched arm held the cloak as an offering, his eyes still closed tight.

She struggled to contain her laughter at the sight. Could this skittish man who shied away at the sight of a woman’s bare flesh really be the Lord Commander?

She lumbered over to him, picking her steps carefully. When she got to Jon she took the heavy, black cape and wrapped herself in its warmth.

“Thank you,” she muttered.

Jon reluctantly opened his eyes. When he saw that she was covered he exhaled with relief and then looked her over, his gaze stopping at her neck.

“You need to fasten it,” he observed.

“Oh, I—”

Jon stepped forward and moved his hands to the cloak’s clasps below her chin, worrying at the
buckles for a moment. Dany tensed at his proximity, the brush of his fingertips against her throat. She swallowed, staring straight ahead at the dark leather of his tunic. Favoring her hurt leg was getting tiresome but she forced herself to remain still.

When Jon finished he didn’t move back, and Dany raised her eyes to find his regarding her. She saw the same warmth reflected there that she remembered from before. *He’s handsome*, she noticed, studying the scars around his eyes, the way little flecks of snow stood out in his messy, black hair.

Jon slowly let out a breath, his eyes never leaving hers, and Dany grew hyper-aware of the weight of his palms on her shoulders, the heat radiating off of his body. She couldn’t help wondering how much warmer she would feel wrapped in his arms.

But then Ghost whined over by the door, and just like that the spell was broken.

Jon cleared his throat loudly and spun away to attend to Ghost. The chill of the air was suddenly much more noticeable when he had left her side and Dany shivered in spite of herself. The table near the fire had never looked so welcoming. She shuffled over laboriously and sat down with her back to the flames, hoping they might drive some of the cold from her joints.

Dany heard the latch of the door, as Jon let Ghost out before coming over to sit across from her. He set a pack down on the table and took his seat. Then there was nothing to break the silence, save the sound of the wind through the trees outside and the crackling and spitting of the fire in the grate. Dany watched him, waiting for him to speak, to explain his unexpected and now very uncomfortable visit. Instead he sat quietly, apparently enraptured by the pattern of the wood grain in the tabletop.

She sighed, realizing that she would have to be the one to speak first unless she relished the idea of spending the rest of her day sitting on the hard, wooden bench, naked under Jon’s cape, waiting out his reticence.

“So, to what do I owe the pleasure of your company?”

Jon shifted in his seat, glancing over at the pack he had brought along.

“I brought you something to eat.”

Dany smirked to herself at his answer. For before she left, Gilly had wrapped roast mutton, hard bread, and jam in some cheesecloth and left it on the little table beside Dany’s bed. And these weren’t their only provisions, either. Surely Gilly had told Jon as much upon her arrival at Castle Black. *He’s here because he wishes to see me*, she thought with pleasure.

“I thank you for taking such attentive care of me, but Gilly left me a fine dinner,” she observed. “Did she not speak with you?”

“Aye, she did. She . . . um. She gave me this for you,” Jon returned, still refusing to look at her. Turning to his pack, he rustled around inside it before producing a bundle of dark clothing, which he handed to Dany across the table. She took it quickly, and felt foolish for thinking he had called on her without cause. Of course he hadn’t. He was Lord Commander and had better things to do than have dinner with a strange woman in the woods. He was only being considerate.

“Ah. Well, thank you,” she said, stamping down on her well of disappointment, and set the bundle of clothes aside. “And give Gilly my gratitude as well.”

Jon nodded before venturing into the pack again. “She did mention that there was food here but I thought you might want something better. Something hot.”
He withdrew a sealed mug from his bag not unlike the one Dany had drunk milk from that morning, and when he removed the lid the contents steamed enticingly. It smelt of fresh meat and warm spices, and Dany felt her mouth water at the aroma, reminded again of how hungry she was. It seemed her body still hadn’t caught up from all that time she had spent unconscious and barely able to take in food at all.

“Rabbit stew,” Jon explained. “It’s delicious.”

“Thank you,” Dany murmured, surprised. It was a thoughtful gesture, something that took time and effort, and he didn’t need to do it. He could have sent Gilly back with her clothes. Instead he came himself, bringing a hot meal and company.

And in that moment, it made perfect sense to her how such a young and gentle man was the leader of so many. Anyone who cared this much for someone he hardly knew was surely an extraordinarily loyal friend and effective, observant commander. The dothraki followed strength. The Meereenese followed wealth. Dany reminded herself that people followed goodness, too; and Jon’s goodness was plain to see. He had a natural charisma about him as well, something she gravitated toward. She could see why others would too.

“Damnit,” he swore suddenly, looking down into the depths of his traveling pack. “Gilly brought the bowls back to the castle to wash. I forgot them.”

“That’s alright,” Dany assured him, pointing to the jug of stew. “We can share it.”

He eyed her dubiously, shaking his head. “Are you sure? You want to drink stew? And share it?”

“Why not?”

Jon shrugged, pushing the stew her way. “You can have your fill first.”

“Thank you.”

Dany lifted the heavy jug, ignoring the resistance of her aching muscles. When the stew hit her mouth it was piping hot but too tasty to deter her, and she slurped it up eagerly. It was thick and well-seasoned, every bit as good as Jon had described.

When she set the jug back down he was watching her with a bemused smirk.

“What?” she asked, a little self-conscious as she wiped at her mouth with the back of her hand.

“It’s just... are you really a queen? Truly?”

Dany frowned at the question, squaring her shoulders. “Why?”

“You just aren’t exactly what I expected.”

She bristled at first but Jon’s expression seemed earnest and kind. Did he consider it a compliment? For someone to be un like a queen?

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” he began. “I expected you to be sterner. Colder.”

“Hm. Well there are all kinds of queens, Jon Snow. Just as there are all kinds of people.” She paused, finding his eyes. “Just as there are all kinds of Lord Commanders.”
Jon sat back abruptly and then sighed, rubbing at his temple. “Gilly told you?”

“Yes, she did. I think it’s very admirable. I’m grateful someone of your stature took the risk of hiding me here.”

“It’s nothing,” he grumbled dismissively. “I’m glad to do it.” He picked up the jug of stew and took a swig of its contents. Clearly he hoped to end the subject there, but Dany pressed on.

“It’s not nothing. I know this is a burden. I will find a way to compensate you for this when I return to Meereen. I swear it.”

Jon passed the stew back her way and shook his head. “There’s no need.”

Dany accepted the proffered jug, grateful for the distraction. She took a long draught of the stew and then sat thoughtfully, unsure of what to say next. The silence weighed on her more heavily than Jon’s thick cape. It was unlike her to be at a loss for words, even more unlike her to be so nervous in the company of a man. It didn’t make any sense.

Mercifully, Jon spoke up next.

“So, how are you feeling? Is your leg any better?”

“It is.” Dany answered, shifting her thigh reflexively. “Thanks to you.”

Jon flushed. “I couldn’t have done it without help. It was a grave injury. The arrow was strange. I haven’t seen one like it before.”

Dany winced at the thought. She could still remember the feel of it rooted deep in her muscle.

“What happened? Who hurt you?” Jon pressed, his voice hardening. Dany thought she could see his fist clenching on the table between them.

It was tempting to tell him the whole bloody story, to rehash all that she had faced. But it felt deeply personal, the tale of her failures. How could she tell him that no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t make peace for her people? How could she explain to Jon that the slaves she liberated had grown to revile her as much as the masters she freed them from? He could never understand what it felt like to know that she had compromised her ideals to reopen the fighting pits for nothing. What would he say if she told him that she had promised herself to a man like Hizdhar zo Loraq, and that all of it, all of it had been for naught?

She knew Jon was staring at her, waiting for a response. “The sort of queen I am was not enough for the people I was trying to help.”

Jon smiled sadly, reaching into his pack again and this time retrieving a wine skin. He drank from it deeply before sliding the skin across the table to Dany. “I know what you mean. It’s impossible to please everyone and still do what’s right.”

She looked into Jon’s eyes and was surprised at the understanding she saw in their brown depths. He is a leader, too, she reminded herself. Perhaps he could relate to her struggles better than she had thought.

“If the concern you’ve shown for them so far is genuine,” Jon continued, “I’d say your people are lucky to have you, Your Grace.”

“I thank you,” Dany said, surprised by his considerate words. "But you don’t have to call me that.
"Not here."

"Daenerys, then?"

She nodded, her stomach fluttering at the sound of her name on his tongue, the alluring novelty of his Northern accent. *Stop acting a foolish girl,* she scolded herself, hoping madly that Jon couldn’t see how flustered she was. She took a hesitant sip of the wine. It was awful, burning on her tongue, but she hoped that if nothing else it might help her to relax.

Her instincts demanded that she keep him at arm’s length, yet Dany felt herself placing her trust in Jon Snow. And not just the appearance of trust so that she could survive in his care for the time being—*real* trust. There was something heartening about the compassion that was still visible on his careworn face. Something made her *want* to trust him, and oddly enough she wanted him to trust her, too. But it still concerned her that he knew her identity, and that somehow he had learned it while she was sleeping.

“So you know my name,” Dany observed. “That I’m a Targaryen.”

“Aye.”

Dany watched his face for some hyperbolic reaction. If Tyrion’s assessment was true, the people of Westeros thought her family to be mad like her father and violent like Viserys. She half expected Jon to recoil at the reminder of her Valyrian blood. But his expression betrayed nothing but mild discomfort under Dany’s probing stare.

“One of the greatest men I’ve ever known was a Targaryen,” he offered.

Dany blinked at him in surprised disbelief. “What?”

“Aemon Targaryen was our maester at Castle Black for decades. So long that many forgot who he was before he joined the Watch. Maester Aemon, we called him.”

Her heart pounded in her chest, her mind vacillating between excitement and doubt. Yet Jon didn’t strike her as a liar. Could it really be that she had a family member here? That someone had managed to survive the war and avoid the reach of the Baratheons?

“Aemon . . .” she whispered, her weary mind struggling to remember her studies, her reading. “I don’t know. My grandfather’s uncle. He would be very old. And how did he escape the Usurper’s wrath for so long?”

“He was old, alright,” Jon agreed, his lips curving upward fondly. “His vows protected him. The Night’s Watch shows no allegiance to any king. So its brothers cannot be traitors to any kingdom.”

“You said ‘was.’” Dany’s brief flicker of hope was snuffed out like a candle in the rain. “So he is dead, then?”

Jon swallowed, averting his eyes. “Aye. He died only last month.” He picked up the wineskin again and took a long swallow.

Dany frowned. *Of course,* she thought darkly. The one person left to her in all the world, and she had missed him by days. “What was he like?”

“Wise,” Jon said, brightening slightly at the memory of his old friend. “Smart. Funny. To his last day he had a quick wit.”
Dany tried to formulate a picture of him in her mind, what he looked like, sounded like. It was strange to think that he had been alive all along. That all of the years she spent convinced she was the last of her family, the very last, there had been another. Only an old man, and across the world. But a Targaryen all the same, and a good man.

“He spoke of you once,” Jon went on. “We got word of you. He told my friend Sam that you were under siege, that you were alone. He would have helped you if he could have, you know.”

Dany sighed. It did no good to ponder on what might have been, on people dead and gone. She may not have been the last Targaryen then, but she certainly was now. *If I look back, I am lost.*

“How did you know?” she asked. “How did you learn my name?”

“Oh. It wasn’t me, actually. It was Sam. He knew just from looking at you.” Jon himself was staring at her then. “Your hair. Your eyes. They gave you away.” His gaze lingered admiringly on Dany’s hair where it hung over her shoulders and cascaded down the front of his cloak, the bright silver striking against the black fabric. When his eyes flicked up to look into hers, Dany found it hard to focus, but the implication of Jon’s words brought panic to the forefront of her mind.

She shook her head in frustration, hoping she had heard Jon wrong. “So now *three* people know about me?” she asked. “Not quite the secret arrangement I was hoping for.”

“I swear to you that Sam is as trustworthy as Gilly. I would trust him with my life. He won’t betray you.”

He seemed as truthful as ever, but it still bothered Dany that there were two others back at the castle, and all day those two talked with dozens more people. What if they let something slip, even by accident? How long until someone came to knock down the flimsy door of the little shack, to take her in the night and sell her to the Lannisters?

But Jon looked unconcerned, his face betraying nothing but respect for his friend, this Sam.

“He sounds like a good man to have by your side,” she relented. “That is a rare thing. I wish I had someone I trusted so much.”

Jon gave her a pitiful look. “Don’t you?”

“Not really. I’ve seen enough treachery to know better.”

He didn’t seem to have a response to that and Dany wondered why she was telling him this at all.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to sound defeatist.”

“You don’t,” Jon protested. “It’s difficult, being the one to make the decisions. Choosing who to put your faith in.”

“I suppose I have no choice but to trust my advisers to look after things while I’m gone. If I’m lucky, Lord Tyrion won’t drink *all* the wine in the city and I’ll still have a home to return to.” She smirked wryly at the thought. She could just imagine flying back to find Meereen in flames but Tyrion somehow managing to hold the pyramid intact with a glass of wine in each hand.

Jon was staring into the dying fire behind her, obviously deep in thought. “Tyrion?” he asked. “Do you mean Tyrion Lannister?”

“Yes.” Dany had lifted the wine to her lips. but she paused at Jon’s words and lowered it back to the
table. “Do you know him?”

“Yes, I do. When I rode for The Wall to swear my vows, he came along. He’s a good man. But I
never expected to hear that he was with you.”

“He rode with you? How did you come by a Lannister on the road to The Wall?” Dany leaned
forward curiously. “Where are you from, Jon?”

“Winterfell.”

“Winterfell,” Dany repeated, her mind searching for the name associated with the house. Stark.
“Who is your father?”

“My father was Eddard Stark,” Jon replied testily. “Why?”

“You know my history, Jon Snow, is it so wrong for me to inquire about yours?”

“No,” he snapped.

Dany shrank back at the ice in his voice. “Then what’s the matter? Why are you unwilling to discuss
it?”

“I think you know.”

Dany frowned, and she could feel her temper flaring even as her blood ran hot. “I know that your
father fought in Robert’s Rebellion. That he helped the Usurper when he destroyed my family and
banished me across the world, a homeless orphan.”

Jon scoffed. “Your father murdered my grandfather and my uncle! He threatened to—”

“I am not my father,” Dany interjected, her fists clenched at her sides. “I know who he was. And I’m
sorry for what he did to your family. But you cannot lay his crimes at my feet.”

Jon deflated at her words, confused. “Well I’m not my father, either.”

Dany wanted to fire back but the bewildered expression on Jon’s face slowly drained the fight out of
her. What was she railing at him for, anyway? And why was he so sensitive about his family? “I’m
sorry,” she muttered. “I don’t know. When you live in fear long enough, suspicion becomes second
nature. I shouldn’t have pressed you about this.”

“It’s alright.” But even as he said it Jon retrieved the wineskin from the table and stowed it back in
his pack, preparing to depart.

No. Don’t leave like this, Dany thought desperately. The last thing she needed was to alienate one of
the only people with the power to help her. What if he doesn’t come back?

I’ll miss him, she realized. Not just because I need his help but because I . . .

She stood with great effort and came around the table as Jon rose.

“I should have headed back long before now,” he announced, brushing past her. Dany reached out
to grab hold of his wrist as he passed and Jon stopped, pivoting to face her.

Under the heat of his stare, she suddenly couldn’t think of anything to say, and after a moment Jon
gently pulled free.
“Ghost will be back soon,” he said over his shoulder, making for the door.

“Alright,” Dany whispered helplessly, and with that he was gone, the thud of the closing door echoing all around her in the quiet cabin.

It was only when she was alone that she realized Jon would be making the trek home in the snow without his cloak to warm him.

Chapter End Notes

I did say there would be angst haha. Thanks so much for reading. Drop a comment if you liked it and have a great day! :)
Jon had been unable to sleep soundly through the past week, and his restlessness propelled him out of bed well before the dawn, when the castle was quiet and still. In these eerily peaceful hours, he was sometimes able to get some work done, answering letters and writing orders. He felt haggard from the lack of sleep, but his solitary morning vigils were preferable to tossing about anxiously in bed.

This particular morning marked Jon's seventh day with almost no sleep, so even the innocuous sound of a knock on his chamber door made him jump where he stood behind his desk.

"Enter," Jon muttered when he'd had a moment to gain his bearings, looking up to see Olly in the doorway. The younger boy bore Jon's breakfast on a tray, just as he did every morning. But lately, something was different, off. Olly didn't smile as he stepped into the room and he didn't wish Jon a
"You're up early again, m'lord," he observed dryly, assessing Jon's appearance with scrutiny. Jon knew it must have seemed unusual, barely dawn and he was already dressed, with evidence of a busy morning in the disarray of his desk and the shadows under his eyes.

Olly continued eyeing Jon as he made his way over to the table and dropped the breakfast tray abruptly onto the surface so that the plates rattled from the impact. With that, he inclined his head at Jon in the briefest and shallowest of bows before turning on his heel to leave the way he'd come.

The boy's curt behavior was unsettling. Jon had enough to do without fretting over his steward, but Olly's rudeness was growing more pronounced, a blatant cry for attention. Jon decided he might as well answer.

"Olly," he called after him. "A moment."

Olly froze with one foot out the door and then trudged heavily back into the room, leveling Jon with a look of unguarded dislike. "Lord Commander?"

"Is there something you wish to tell me?" Jon took a step toward Olly, who was standing still and straight, hands in fists at his sides. A deepening frown creased his pale, freckled face.

Olly answered with questions of his own. "Why are you already dressed for the day? Where are you going? Where have you been going? I'm your steward—don't you think I know you've been acting strangely? Leaving when you shouldn't? This is about those wildlings, isn't it?"

Jon sighed tiredly and collapsed into his chair. He was thoroughly exhausted already. He couldn't muster the patience or the will to defend himself to Olly just then.

"Yes," he replied after a moment, massaging his temples. It was half true—Jon did need to speak to Tormund, but the Free Folk weren't the only matter he needed to attend to today.

"Why? Why have you brought them here? You've taught me about your work, shown me what it is you do, what you manage. So I know they take our food and our space. I know the Northerners won't let you give them land or houses. So why? Why are they here?"

"It's complicated, Olly. You don't understand. You haven't seen the things I've seen North of The Wall. If you had, you—,"

"I knew it," Olly interjected, sounding considerably relieved. "You're lying to them, aren't you? Just like you were when you were their prisoner. You won't really keep them here, right?"

Jon balked at Olly's words. It was off-putting—his coldness, his bright-eyed hope that Jon was deceiving or manipulating an entire civilization of people selfishly, just out of some archaic sense of duty or loyalty to the Watch. But Jon knew that true commitment to the Watch meant belief in his vows—to protect the realms of men. However different they may be, the wildlings were still men.

"No, Olly. I intend to protect them here for as long as I can. We need to make peace with the wildlings. For our survival as much as for theirs. We can't stop the White Walkers without their help."

Olly's face contorted into a grimace. "They're our enemies. You can't bring our enemies here and say it's for our survival—"

"I can, and I do," Jon interjected. His fatigue had cut his already short patience to the quick, and he
was through coddling Olly's prejudice. The boy had suffered because of the Thenns, it was true. But Jon had suffered as well. Bearing such grudges accomplished nothing, and Jon was finished enabling Olly's petulant hatred. "Every wildling that is killed beyond The Wall becomes a soldier in the Night King's army. That's a risk we can't afford to take. The matter isn't up for discussion. Is that clear?"

Olly gave a tense and furious nod but refused to look at Jon.

"You're dismissed," he announced, waving toward the door. Olly stalked out without reply, leaving Jon to his thoughts.

After a lonesome breakfast in the chill of his chambers, Jon found that he was too distracted and restless to complete any more work for the morning, and he summoned Tormund to his chamber.

"Jon," the big man greeted him warmly, slapping him so hard on the back that Jon nearly lost his breath. "A bit early for a drink by Crow standards, eh?"

Jon grinned, shaking his head. "Aye, it is. But I've not asked you here for drinking, Tormund, as well you know."

Tormund huffed at that, his exhalation rustling his thick, ginger mustache. "What is it now, then? Your coward Crow friends finally had enough o' us Free Folk? Sending us packing, are you?"

"No, of course not. No," Jon assured him firmly. "But my men still aren't happy with this arrangement. I think it would be good for morale—on both sides, mind you—if everyone were to see the Free Folk . . . participating more in the daily routine here."

"'Routine?'" Tormund asked uncertainly. "What do you . . ."

"I mean that it would show solidarity between us if your men contributed more. Pulled their weight, so to speak. With work, duties and the like."

Tormund scoffed. "Duties? You kneelers still don't get it, do you? The point o' being free is that you got no duty to anyone. As it should be."

"Well, things are different here for us kneelers," Jon explained with a chuckle. "And I need you to be a part of it if I'm going to keep your people safe."

Tormund sighed dramatically but made no further protests, and Jon could hope for nothing more than that.

"It won't be anything major," he added, hoping to assuage Tormund's doubts. "Just small tasks to help out. Joining hunting parties to try and make up the food deficit. Sending men to chop wood for fires. That sort of thing."

"Fine, fine. If it stops your Crow cawing, I'll see to it. You'll have your men."

After treating Tormund to some strong mead for his trouble, Jon ventured across the castle to speak with Sam.
Unfortunately, his success with Tormund didn't follow him to the library, and Sam offered only bad news to add to his worries.

"I've been doing as you asked and I haven't found a thing. I keep poring over the same books, looking for information about the Others. But it's been so long since anyone's believed in them that there isn't really any practical information about fighting them. I might be able to find something more, though, if I could look elsewhere. The Citadel, for instance." Sam was rueful as he spoke, his eyes searching the floor, the dusty shelves, resting anywhere but on Jon.

It had been weeks since Jon assigned Sam the task of researching the White Walkers in the hopes of finding a way to stop them. He knew that Sam was right—that the Citadel might offer more prospects, and Sam needed to begin his maester training. Jon had held him back in the hopes that Sam could help him devise some plan of action before leaving for Oldtown. But he would need to let Sam go soon, as much as he disliked the idea.

After what Jon had seen at Hardhome, there was no other choice than to look for alternative measures, even if that meant Sam had to study them elsewhere. The Night's Watch simply lacked the numbers necessary to meet the Night King's army on the field of battle. Even if their numbers were greater, they could not fight the dead with conventional means.

The dragonglass had provided only the faintest glimmer of hope, and that was now lost to them. Jon knew the army would find a way to them soon, that the sea wouldn't keep them at bay forever. And when the Night King came upon them with his undead legion, they would have no way to defend themselves, much less all the realms of men.

Every day that passed made Jon more anxious and fearful, and he still lacked a plan. The wars of the past five years left the Northern lords without the disposable men they once had to send to the Watch. And the Southern lords would only mock their warnings of the White Walkers, just as they'd done before.

Even if every house in the realm sent a tribute of prisoners, it still would not suffice. Jon didn't need handfuls of men. He required armies. Big armies with well-trained soldiers who wielded dragonglass and Valyrian steel. *Fat chance of that. I might as well hope for some fire-breathing dragons while I'm at it.*

Jon chuckled darkly at the thought, his mind roaming back to Daenerys Targaryen and her wild tale of crossing the sea on a dragon's back. Jon believed her. Considering everything he'd witnessed, dragons weren't really such a strange idea. After all, it had been less than two centuries since dragons had walked the earth. But the White Walkers hadn't shown themselves for several millennia. That was what Jon was up against—swaying the realm to believe in the stuff of frightening stories, stories like Old Nan used to tell. Now they were viewed as nothing more than myths to entertain children.

But it gave Jon some comfort to know that dragons were as real as the enemy, that at least the means to challenge the Others existed. Because he knew that in addition to dragonglass and Valyrian steel, fire could harm a wight. But Daenerys's dragon still hadn't shown itself. Even if it did, Jon doubted she would stay to fight, especially after their last parting.

"Jon?" Sam asked curiously, dragging him back to the present. "Why were you . . . laughing?"

Jon sighed, shaking his head at Sam. "Because we really are out of options. I know for certain we've reached our last resort when I find myself praying for a dragon to save us all."

"A dragon?" Sam asked, brightening with interest. "Do you mean the Targaryen girl's dragon? Did it really come back? Have you seen it?!"
Despite his poor mood, Jon grinned at Sam's excitement, his voice reaching a higher pitch with each added inquiry until he was practically squeaking.

"No, I haven't seen any dragon myself," Jon admitted. "I believe she's sincere that one brought her here, but I've seen no evidence it's still around."

"Ah, I suppose that's to be expected. I don't know where or how a dragon could reasonably hide around here, not with our men patrolling The Wall as they are."

Jon nodded. Sam was right, which only made Jon more uncomfortable. What would it mean for Daenerys if her dragon had deserted her here? Without it, safe transport back to Essos was something that would be difficult for her to obtain. Beyond that, the loss of the dragon would hit her hard. The dragons represented her power, a power so vast that tales of it had reached him at The Wall half a world away. Without it, she would be vulnerable to the enemies who had nearly killed her, the people who had chased her out of her makeshift home and right into Jon's path.

"It's a shame, though," Sam went on thoughtfully. "We could sure use a dragon right now, couldn't we? Perhaps—"

Jon raised a hand to silence Sam before he could continue. "It doesn't matter. As I've said, I don't think there's any dragon here right now. And if there were, what makes you think Daenerys would help us? It's hard enough to get the people of Westeros to believe in the White Walkers. How are we to persuade a woman from the other side of the world?"

Sam shrugged.

"And besides, even if she did believe, I doubt a dragon is as easy to command as a soldier. She would have to involve herself. To fight alongside us. And she's a queen. Too valuable to put her life at risk on the battlefield, and probably far too busy to spend much more time here."

"Well, yes. But . . ."

"But what?" Jon urged, pushing Sam's hesitation.

"She does owe you, doesn't she? You saved her life. You continue to look after her at great personal risk. And you've spent a bit of time with her now, too. One might say . . ." Sam looked like he might stop again, but a severe look from Jon hurried him onward. "One might say more time than is necessary. Is there not some . . . affection between you?"

Jon snorted. "'Affection?' Between a queen and a bastard? A Night's Watch bastard at that. No, Sam."

Sam shook his head stubbornly. "Maybe not between a queen and a bastard. But between a man and a woman, perhaps. I noticed how you looked at her, Jon."

"And what did you see?" Jon challenged, the dread rising like bile in his throat. What difference did it make how he saw her as a woman? None of that changed their position, their obligations, their responsibilities. None of that changed the things he'd said to her when they'd argued before.

"Concern. Admiration. Maybe something more," Sam answered after a moment.

"No," Jon replied simply. "And besides, after our last conversation, I doubt she's inclined to do me any favors." He regretted the words the moment they left his lips, for Jon knew they would only prompt more questions from Sam.
"What happened?" Sam probed, his brow furrowing, mouth falling into that familiar expression of worry that so often adorned his round face.

"We were talking. Just talking about . . . everything, really. Our pasts. People. Even Maester Aemon."

Sam smiled slightly at that but said nothing, willing Jon to continue.

"It turned to our families, and I didn't want to discuss it. I don't like retelling it. How I've lost them. All of them. How if I hadn't come here, I might have helped them. How even if I'd stayed at Winterfell I never would have been one of them. Not really. Just my father's bastard, born of a woman even he wouldn't reveal to me."

Sam swallowed, opening his mouth as if to offer words of consolation. None came.

"But I didn't tell her that. I just avoided the subject, and she took it as bitterness about our families' history. She thought I . . . resented her as a Targaryen because of my father's war with her father, my family's war with her family."

"Oh," Sam said quietly, watching Jon with sad eyes. "I'm sorry."

"We both said things we shouldn't," Jon reflected, scowling. "I understand why she was upset, because I get it. I know what it is to be judged by your name. I would never do that to her."

"You should tell her that," Sam pointed out.

Jon had a dozen objections in mind already. *What's the point? Why should I care what she thinks? It's better this way. No use getting close to a woman. No use getting close to a queen, especially. Even worse to get attached to a queen who's destined to leave me behind. Besides, she won't see me. Why would she? I was cruel and stubborn, acting a daft boy instead of a man.*

But as Sam excused himself to return to his books, his words lingered, having planted the seeds of doubt within Jon. Perhaps he *should* go and make his amends with the Dragon Queen. It didn't matter that they had no future. She would still need Jon's help getting home, and a good man, an honorable man, would be there for her despite his own personal feelings.

With that thought in mind, Jon left the library. Walking through the halls of Castle Black with renewed purpose, he felt a little better, the weight of guilt over his disagreement with Daenerys at least somewhat lifted from his shoulders. But as Jon made his way through the yard toward the stables, something caught his eye. In the shadows under the balcony he saw Ser Alliser, glowering, foul and sour as ever. To his right, a small and wiry boy was talking, eyes darting about nervously all the while. It was Olly. He stood on the tips of his toes to reach the height of Alliser's ear as he spoke—whispered—conspiratorially.

*My loyal steward,* Jon thought, his mouth twitching with anger. He stalked off to fetch his stallion but made a mental note to investigate later, and to find some assignment to occupy Ser Alliser and put a stop to his scheming at last.

When he arrived at Daenerys's cabin, Jon found himself hesitating awkwardly on her doorstep, his gloved fist hovering in the air before the door. He wanted to knock, needed to see her, but he still
didn't know what to say. He didn't have a satisfactory explanation for his anger the last time they'd seen one another or a way to apologize for his absence since.

So he stood with his hand suspended in the cold air, half tempted to turn around and ride back to the castle, and for good this time. After all, what did it really matter if Daenerys was cross with him? Soon she would be fully recovered, and when that day arrived she would journey back to her kingdom across the ocean where she would forget about Jon entirely. He would most likely never see or hear from her again, and their acquaintance would be nothing but a tiny footnote in the grand history of her life. It was a waste of Jon's time to worry about her opinion or her happiness.

Yes, Jon knew how useless it was for him to dwell on thoughts of Daenerys, but that hadn't stopped him from tossing around on his hard bed all through the night over the past week, wondering what she was doing. It didn't prevent him from hoping, shamefully, that she might be thinking of him, too.

Before Jon could spend any more time debating his next move, he was startled by the door swinging inward before him. His hand fell to his side and he took an instinctive step back, his eyes finding Daenerys where she stood in the open doorway.

She looked altogether a different woman than the one he'd left in a fit of anger a week before. Of course, Jon had thought her beautiful from the moment he'd found her lying in the woods; but now she was breathtaking. Her cheeks were rosy, eyes bright from rest. Her hair hung in loose curls over her shoulders, smooth and clean, shining in the sunlight so bright it was nearly as white as snow.

But her fair face only held his gaze for a moment, and Jon couldn't stop his eyes from roaming over the rest of her. On her back, he noticed, Daenerys still wore the black cloak he'd lent her before. But it was what she was wearing underneath that demanded his attention. Instead of her raggedy white gown, Daenerys wore a tight dress of dark blue wool. It hugged her figure flattering, flaunting her small waist and the alluring curve of her hips before it fanned out in a loose skirt. It was nothing like the regal gown she'd been wearing when Jon first saw her. No, it was a commoner's dress— the fabric thick to ward off the Northern cold. But it couldn't do a very good job of that. Not when the chest was wide open, the neck of the dress plunging so low that the generous swells of Daenerys's creamy breasts were all but bared to him. Instead of fastening in the back, the gown was tied in the front. The laces crisscrossed their way up her belly, and the top of the dress was fashioned so that even the tightest lacing couldn't close the two panels over her chest. It seemed meant to fall open, to put its wearer on display, and the result was, well... disorienting.

Jon had already seen Daenerys naked, though only for the briefest moment. It hadn't been his intention, and he'd done his best to drive the image from his mind. But try as he might, he hadn't forgotten how flawless and touchable her pale skin had looked. He was tormented by the lines of her body, lithe and graceful despite the way her injury troubled her. Yes, lovely and stunning and not intended for his eyes.

Now her brazen dress only made matters worse, for Jon recognized the cut all too well. It was a whore's dress—a finely-made dress, but a whore's dress all the same.

He couldn't erase the memory tied to that knowledge, of the time many years before when he'd nearly slept with a comely, ginger-haired woman in the brothel north of Winterfell. All the women there wore dresses like this, their waists cinched nearly tight enough to squeeze their bosoms free of the restrictive fabric. It was as enticing as it was indecent, and Jon wasn't sure what would possess Daenerys to wear such a dress. But he found himself unable to look away from her in something so suggestive, so inviting.

 Queens don't invite the affection of bastards, Jon told himself forcefully, snapping out of his near-stupor and dragging his eyes back up to hers. He was unnerved by the frustration he saw there, and
reminded himself that he’d been standing in her doorway for some time, staring at her like a starving wolf salivating over fresh meat.

Jon gulped, finding his bearings and forcing the pleasantries from his lips.

"Pardon me, Your Gr—." Daenerys's expression hardened at the title and Jon recalled her request that he address her using her name instead. He knew that she probably only asked him for the sake of discretion, but at the time it had made his heart soar to think she'd wanted the intimacy of given names between them. It seemed silly now that he'd ever thought he could share that closeness with someone like her.

"Daenerys," he corrected himself. He thought he saw something soften in her eyes when he said it. And then, because he could think of nothing else to say, "Hello."

She raised a quizzical brow at him and sighed.

"Lord Commander Snow," she said evenly, dropping into a slight, polite curtsy. It was steady and neat, and despite being stung by her formality, Jon noted that her condition must have improved substantially to allow her to walk about the cabin unaided and to drop into a curtsy at a moment's notice. But when she rose back to stand upright, he didn't miss her almost imperceptible wince of discomfort. She's still hurting, he thought, frowning.

After that, there was nothing but the steam of their breath to fill the air between them as Daenerys continued to eye him curiously and Jon wondered again how best to pave over their last argument.

"I'm sorry for how I—"

"I came to apologize—" Jon began, stopped short by Daenerys's own rushed declaration, and he was surprised to see his contrition mirrored in her own features. She'd forgiven him, and just like that the world seemed a little lighter. He let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding in, the tension in his shoulders giving way.

"You can just call me Jon," he offered. Daenerys smiled almost shyly at that, dimples settling into her cheeks. Her smile was sweet and infectious, reaching all the way up to her eyes. Smiling that way, she looked like the blushing maids who used to flirt with Robb at feasts. She appeared altogether young and uninhibited, nothing like the somber queen she'd been a moment before. Daenerys smiling at him that way made Jon's heart expand in his chest, and he felt somehow stronger and more vulnerable all at once.

"Well, Jon," she said, carefully emphasizing his name. "I haven't gotten a chance to properly see this . . . snow. I was a bit indisposed the last time we were out here. So I thought since it's bright out and not too windy today I might have a look around."

Her childlike curiosity was endearing, but Jon was concerned that she would do something so foolhardy.

"It's dangerous out here, and you didn't know I was coming. Were you planning to go on your own?"

"What of it?" Daenerys demanded, her lips quirking upward playfully. "You're not my Commander, Jon."

Her words felt almost like a challenge, and there was something more than a jest in her eyes. She seemed almost like she might be flirting with him. Jon swallowed, fighting back the inappropriate desire that threatened to cloud his mind. Their time apart had somehow only deepened his attraction
to Daenerys, and despite everything the tension between them hung taut and delicate as the strings of a lute.

"Anyway, I wouldn't have been on my own," she insisted leaning to one side of the door jamb and making way for Ghost to squeeze past her as he emerged from the cabin to greet his master.

Jon reached out to pat the wolf on the head, chuckling as Ghost nuzzled against him affectionately.

"Fair enough. Ghost is a better traveling companion than most," Jon allowed. "But why not give him the afternoon off, and I'll accompany you instead." He knew it was mad, indulging his strange new infatuation with Daenerys. But her delighted nod removed any doubt that he would go with her.

Jon found himself offering her his arm, and did his best to ignore the undeniable spark of heat he felt when she settled her hands just above his elbow.

As they set out into the woods, Jon noticed that Daenerys was right about the weather that day. It was milder than most this far North, even with the light snowfall. Their first few steps were silent, and while Jon was content just to walk beside Daenerys, he could see that something was on her mind as they picked their way across the snowy forest floor.

It went against all his instincts to pry, but he decided to try and find out what was bothering her.

"So," he started, his voice ringing hollow and uncertain as he dispelled the silence with small talk. "How have you been getting along? I like your uh . . . new dress. Where did you get it?"

Daenerys shook her head quickly as if to dismiss the questions.

"Gilly. She said she picked it up in some place called Mole's Town?" Jon almost felt like laughing at that. So it really was a whore's dress after all. Daenerys didn't seem to notice anything amiss with her new wardrobe. She was apparently still preoccupied with something else.

"I'm just thinking," she went on. "Earlier you mentioned it was dangerous out here. What did you mean? The Free Folk are with you, now. Are there wild animals that linger here even in the cold? Or is there something else?"

"Well there are bears, wolves, shadowcats," Jon answered, skirting around the real threat. He didn't want to frighten her unnecessarily when she would be staying in the North amidst these dangers for a while longer. But a part of him also wanted to tell her the truth. Already he sensed a sort of confidant in Daenerys, someone who knew what it was to carry the weight of command, who knew what it meant to be the target of ridicule for no reason other than a name. And if anyone would understand threats from supposedly mythical creatures, it would be the Mother of Dragons.

"And the White Walkers," he finished at last.

Daenerys assumed a disaffected expression, but Jon noticed that her breath caught a little in her throat. It wasn't the first time he'd seen this attitude from her, this resistance to showing even the smallest amount of fear. Again, Jon saw something of himself in her, a reflection of his own pain and doubt—the necessity of strength, of keeping up appearances as a leader, a ruler.

"'White Walkers,'" she repeated. "Gilly mentioned them. What are they?"

Jon was at a loss. How did one describe something as terrifying at the Night King and his horde to someone who had never seen or really heard about them before? What could he really say?

"They're the worst threat this world has ever faced."
"That's a bold claim. Why are they such a threat?"

Jon sighed; his mind was still a bit foggy from lack of sleep but this was important. He wanted Daenerys to have as much warning as possible, even if her people did have an ocean to protect them from the undead horde. For all he knew, the Night King would eventually find a way to cross the sea after he'd decimated Westeros. And perhaps if she understood that, she might wish to help them fight.

"I think they might have been men once," he began. "But now they're . . . something else. They're undead. They can't die from exposure, or hunger, or from normal wounds either. Only Valyrian steel and dragonglass can kill them. Well, those things and fire."

Daenerys didn't respond. Instead she was staring straight ahead, her face pinched with concern. Jon decided to press on and tell her the worst of it.

"And there's not so many of them, really. The trouble is that they can . . . turn people. Regular people like you and me. When they kill, they raise the dead back again to add to their ranks. They lead a huge force. The Army of the Dead."

As expected, this was where Daenerys lost faith in his story. She dropped his arm, shaking her head.

"That can't be true. Only death pays for life." She said the last bit with a queer sort of surety, as though reciting a chant or a song.

"Well, the soldiers are dead. In a way, their deaths pay for their lives as wights. But I wouldn't call their existence a life. It isn't life. Not really. They're in thrall to the Night King."

Jon could tell that even as her mind fought against such an unpleasant revelation, Daenerys believed him. He could see it in her fear. Why fear something if you don't believe it exists? But he felt no victory in the argument, because she looked more and more hopeless and dejected all the time, her face paling with dread.

"How many of them are there?"

"Tens of thousands. Maybe a hundred thousand."

"But how can that be?" she demanded, clearly alarmed. "If this is true, why are you all still here? Why aren't you moving south, and why doesn't the rest of the world know? They can help you!"

"The rest of the world doesn't believe it, Daenerys," Jon explained. "Surely you can understand that. I'd wager you've met your fair share of people who didn't believe in all the things you've seen and done."

"Well, what are you going to do? You can't – You can't just stay here and die."

"I don't intend to," Jon assured her. "But I must stay here and fight. It's the oath I swore. To guard the realms of men. If nothing else, we can delay them."

For a long moment, Daenerys only blinked at him, her face unreadable.

"That's very brave. The world could do with more people like you, Jon Snow."

Ordinarily such a compliment from someone like Daenerys—a queen and a singularly beautiful woman—would make Jon nervous or uncomfortable. Instead, his heart swelled with pride. From what he'd learned from her so far, Daenerys was the bravest woman he'd ever heard of. For her to
acknowledge his own courage was nothing short of an honor.

"I could say the same about you," Jon rejoined.

She snorted, shaking her head modestly. But he could see she was pleased with his words. He knew that the view from the top was lonely, that recognition and validation were in short supply. He was happy to give them to her if he could.

After that, they proceeded in pleasant silence for a while. It seemed the scenery all around them was enough to enthrall Daenerys and divert her mind from White Walkers and dead men rising. As for Jon, he was satisfied only to be near her, just to feel the warm pressure of her fingers on his bicep and hear her little gasps of surprise at the size of the ironwood trees, at the way the snow seemed to sparkle in the air as it drifted lazily down upon them.

Jon decided that spending time with Daenerys was good for him, a soothing balm on his persistent, burning anxiety. The worry that usually occupied his thoughts slowly abated as they strolled along, and it was all because of her. He'd never felt anything quite like it.

Even the dark cloud that Ygritte's death had formed over his life was gradually dissipating. A part of Jon's heart would always belong to Ygritte, but time had given him perspective and a measure of closure. Now, around Daenerys, he felt lighter and freer than he had in years.

Jon had admired her strength and resilience from the moment they'd met, but her beauty had gradually lent heat to that admiration. Looking at her now, he knew he was fanning the flames into a wildfire—one he had neither the inclination nor the means to extinguish. Because the more he got to know her, the more he came to care for her.

Jon tried to get a look at her out of the corner of his eye, curious to know if she felt it too—this inexplicable connection between them, one that excited him merely with the touch of her hand. As he watched, Daenerys closed her eyes, tilting her face up to feel the snow on her skin. Her nose and cheeks were bright red from the harsh cold, but she smiled when the tiny flakes landed on her face.

Seeing her like that, it was impossible to stop himself from smiling along with her, enchanting as she was. Jon thought wistfully that if he could, he'd spend all his time making Daenerys happy. It was then that her eyes shifted over to see him looking.

At first Jon feared he'd offended her with his leering, but then she grinned, dropping her hands from his arm and stepping away. She moved to a place where the snow was especially thick and squatted down carefully, her lips pressing together in a thin line of pain as the movement bothered her injured thigh. Cupping both hands, she scooped some snow from the ground and weighed it in her palms.

"It feels . . . strange," Daenerys decided, eyeing it as it glistened in the sunlight. "It almost burns."

"Aye, it's not meant to be touched with your bare skin for very long."

Daenerys dropped the snow and shakily stood upright, wiping her reddened hands against her skirt to dry them.

"You seem to have a lot of objections to my bare skin, Jon Snow," she observed, her lips curling upward mischievously.

Jon didn't much care to be reminded again of how he'd walked in on her naked before, but he couldn't help smirking at her sense of humor.

"I just don't want you to hurt yourself," he replied. "Here." Jon removed his gloves and tucked them...
away in a pocket before reaching down to take Daenerys's hands. For the briefest moment, she shrunk away from his touch as if startled. But then she looked up at his eyes and raised her hands to his in surrender.

Daenerys's hands were small and pale, engulfed by the size of his own. Her flesh was like ice from handling the snow, and Jon methodically rubbed her hands between his palms to warm her up. She stood perfectly still and let him, and it felt somehow significant that he was touching her flesh-to-flesh, holding her hands as he held her unwavering, violet gaze.

Her skin was impossibly soft, like new-spun silk. It was all he could think as he held her, reveling in the smooth slide of her fingers between his. It was rare that he really touched anyone. Jon's was an isolated life, bound by honor and duty that demanded loneliness. There was something indescribably comforting about feeling Daenerys's hands in his, and seeing the trust in her striking eyes.

"Your hands are soft," he observed quietly.

"Yours aren't," Daenerys replied, and Jon pulled back, affronted and a little embarrassed. Of course his hands weren't soft. They were scarred and calloused and wind-beaten. But Daenerys slipped her fingers quickly to his wrists and urged him back toward her.

"I like it," she explained. "You have . . . a warrior's hands. They're strong." She dropped her gaze to their joined hands. "But gentle."

Her touch emboldened him somehow, and despite his earlier nervousness, Jon felt calm and focus starting to settle over him like a cloak in the cold. In a fight, he never hesitated or thought things through. He acted on instinct only, and it had served him well so far. Just then, his instincts cried out not for battle but for the thrill of a different sort of risk.

Jon drew Daenerys's hands slowly up to his mouth and exhaled against her tender flesh, hoping the heat of his breath would bring some feeling back. She let out a small sigh at the warmth. The little satisfied sound made something stir deep in his belly.

Jon told himself he was merely being kind, trying to make Daenerys more comfortable in a climate she was unused too. But he couldn't deny the peculiar intimacy of the moment, or just how good it felt to hold her hands in his.

He glanced up to see her watching him, her eyes wide and welcoming. His own eyes dropped involuntarily to her lips and Jon marveled that in defiance of the cold, dry wind, they still looked soft and supple.

He gulped, wondering—not for the first time—what Daenerys's lovely mouth might taste like. The energy between them shifted, and the sense of whimsy that had previously accompanied their stroll was replaced by something else.

Jon had felt it before with Ygritte—a mutual attraction that drew two people together. It was different with Daenerys, intensified by the palpable temptation that pulled him toward her. A new, unexpected certainty that she felt it too made him almost dizzy with want.

But the moment collapsed when Jon heard a voice on the wind, somewhere down the forest path behind them. A second voice answered the first, cutting through the still, crisp Winter air like good steel through muscle.

Jon froze, and some part of him registered that Daenerys also stilled beside him. But he wasn't looking at her anymore. He was listening hard, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up in
foreboding when he heard the first voice again, louder this time. Someone was coming toward them. He and Daenerys had moved off the path and into the thickness of the trees before, but they were not far enough to be completely obscured from onlookers on the road.

Jon glanced back down at Daenerys, squeezing her hands anxiously between his own.

"Try not to move at all," he whispered quickly. "And don't say a word. We're a ways off the road. There's a chance whoever it is will walk right past."

Daenerys nodded to show she understood, but already Jon could see her trying to look over her shoulder at the source of the sounds. They were standing with her back to the road, but he was loath to let her turn around, lest a snapping twig beneath her boots give them away.

He could hardly bear to imagine what would happen should they be discovered. It mattered little was out there—any person who saw Daenerys was a threat to her. Others would be quicker to solve the puzzle than Jon had been. There were those in the realm who, like Sam had done, would mark her as a Targaryen on sight. And even if they didn't, the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch having a secret rendezvous with a strange woman in the woods would certainly set tongues wagging. It didn't help that this particular Lord Commander already had gossip and suspicion to contend with. No, whoever it was, Jon knew he and Daenerys had to remain hidden from them at all costs.

"I'm telling you," the first voice insisted, growing louder and closer every moment. "I saw a fookin' dragon last night, I did."

"No. There's no dragons anywhere, you bloody idiot. You finished off two flagons o' the Crow's piss-wine and saw a bird. That's all."

"No. I know what I saw! It were a dragon. Big, big enough to swallow a man whole, and black as the Crow's capes it were."

Daenerys started at that, craning her head over her shoulder to see the road, where the men slowly marched into view. Jon couldn't entirely make them out through the trees, but their speech and the appearance of their clothing was enough to tell him that they were wildlings. It was then he remembered his conversation with Tormund.

These men must have been the ones Tormund had chosen to fetch wood for the Watch. How could Jon have been so careless as to forget that by his own order, men would be coming into the very woods where he was trying to hide an exiled queen from the world? Fool, he thought furiously.

Jon couldn't very well protect Daenerys if he thoughtlessly sent people in her direction without warning in broad daylight. Luckily, these particular men didn't seem to have noticed them yet. But Daenerys was entranced by their conversation, desperate as she was for news about her missing dragon.

"Drogon?" she said in a frantic whisper, and before Jon could react she wrenched her hands free of his and wheeled around, taking one, large step toward the intruding wildlings. As he'd feared, her movement disturbed the brush underfoot with a loud crunch of snow and rustle of dead leaves that set Jon's teeth on edge.

Instinctively he lunged forward and grasped Daenerys firmly by the arm, dragging her with him behind a tree trunk to hide. To keep them both safely obscured behind the trunk's width, Jon pulled her flush up against him so they stood chest-to-chest. They were close—so close Jon could feel the startled pounding of her heart against his own. He could see indignant rage flickering in Daenerys's eyes as she glared up at him. Clearly, she wasn't fond of being yanked around, especially when she'd
been so keen to hear what the men were saying. But gradually her eyes softened, and her breath slowed as, like Jon, she listened for the wildlings on the path behind him.

The thud of booted feet got closer, closer. But it didn't stop. The men weren't halting to investigate the noise. It seemed they hadn't heard anything at all, and the incredulous wildling was chuckling at what the other had said.

"Suppose it were a great, black Crow you saw then," he mocked his companion. "Mayhaps the Crows learned to fly and that's how they built their bloody Wall so high, eh?"

The first wildling mumbled something grumpily under his breath, provoking a peal of ecstatic laughter from the other that echoed throughout the woods. But still they did not stop, and after a while, the sounds of their footsteps, as well as their laughter, faded into the distance.

Jon felt relief spread through him like the warmth of a hot bath—they were safe. His eyes found Daenerys's and she was jubilant, overjoyed at the news of Drogon's sighting, and grateful that they hadn't been caught by the men on the path.

The threat was passed, and they could head back to the cabin now. But neither of them moved to disengage from their embrace. Instead, Daenerys shivered as though chilled by the breeze. She raised a hand to lay it against his chest, her eyes holding his.

"Jon," she whispered, and he was mesmerized by the sight of her lips forming his name.

Jon released her arm, and in a fit of mad courage, moved his hands to her waist instead, guiding her closer still. She obliged, even as she took a nervous, shaky breath, and her hips followed his hands, pressing herself against him firmly enough to make him squirm.

Eye contact became too intense for him to bear and his eyes dropped unhelpfully to Daenerys's chest, heaving with every breath, straining the laces of her dress. The flesh of her neck and bosom was pale and smooth, and he wondered what it might feel like to kiss and suckle at her throat until it bruised beneath his lips.

His fingers curled into the fabric of her dress as he fought back the urge to lower his hands, to dig his fingers into the round arse that he knew hid under Daenerys's skirts. He imagined what he'd do then, how he'd dip his head down to claim her lips with his own. It would be so simple to unlace her tempting bodice and free her ample teats to his attentions. He wanted to kiss them, too, to run his tongue over a nipple until it hardened between his lips. To lay her out on plush furs and acquaint himself with every single inch of her. He would hoist up her dress and kiss his way up her pretty legs, pausing on her thigh where the scar was, to bear all her pain and fear away with his touch. He'd make her forget what it even was to hurt. She deserved to know only pleasure, and to know it at his hands. And when his tongue found her sweet cunt he knew she would taste every bit as divine and sinful as he'd dreamed she would. Finally he'd fuck her, long and slow and deep. So deep, he'd lose himself inside her, falling far enough to forget how wrong it was. That he was a man of the Watch, a bastard, and she a queen.

But he didn't do that. He couldn't do that, he reminded himself sharply.

It seemed Daenerys was happy to remind him, too, as she cleared her throat loudly to get his attention.

"My eyes aren't down there, Jon," she chided him. When he lifted his eyes meekly to hers, he saw no reproach there. Only hunger. "And neither are my lips."
Her boldness was as alluring as it was astounding, and Jon's tenuous control was faltering. All of his many reasons for restraint abandoned him now under the touch of her hand, her teasing flirtation. It had been so long since he'd been with a woman, and she was so beautiful. So sweet.

Jon gently brushed a long strand of her silver hair out of her face, tucking it behind her ear. His hand lingered against her cheek and he moved his thumb over her mouth, the pad of it dragging across her lower lip, testing the softness he longed to taste.

Daenerys closed her eyes, leaning slightly into his touch. There was no doubting her intentions or wishes, and that alone drove Jon almost mad with desire. The most beautiful woman in the world, and she longed for him. But he knew what it meant, this feeling that already threatened to undo him. He knew what would happen if he gave in and kissed her at last, what it might lead to in the end.

And that was what gave him pause.

The wildlings had confirmed that Daenerys's dragon was around after all. She would leave him soon, returning to her life, her people. What good could it do for Jon to fall harder, to get more attached to a woman who would disappear from his life in no time at all? What honor was there in laying with a woman he could never call his own? And worst of all, what if, despite any precautions they might take, Daenerys became pregnant? How could Jon bear the shame of fathering a bastard? Of putting a baby in her belly before she flew across the sea, leaving her to deal with the responsibility on her own, to raise a son or daughter he would never know?

And then there was the matter of his vows, his position. Even if Daenerys stayed in the forest, he could only keep these meetings a secret for so long. What would happen when his brothers found out about her?

Jon recalled Sam's tale of the attempted assault on Gilly at the castle not long ago and imagined Daenerys facing similar abuse. The mere notion overwhelmed him with rage. If anyone dared to harm her that way, Jon knew he'd kill them. His regard for her evidently compromised his ability to be calm or objective.

Of course, anyone who discovered her would also be tempted to turn her over to the Lannisters. No doubt the man to give them the last, greatest threat to King Tommen's legitimacy would be handsomely rewarded. And what sort of awful fate would Daenerys face then?

Unbidden, the memory of Ygritte's final moments crowded its way into his mind. He could remember how it felt, holding Ygritte in his arms as she died, the light leaving her fierce and mirthful eyes. Losing her had been nearly unendurable, a painful guilt that gnawed at Jon until he was empty inside. She had been after him in that battle, and it was their love that put her at risk and struck her down. Some part of Jon knew that Daenerys was different, special. If she died when he might have prevented it, it would be the tragedy to finally break him. No, he thought dismally. I won't doom another person I care for to die. He had to keep Daenerys at arm's length until she departed the North forever, even if it hurt them both.

"Forgive me," he said gruffly, shoving off from the tree behind him so that Daenerys had to step back and away. He tried to ignore the surprise and dismay in her pretty eyes as they snapped open. With a heavy heart Jon turned to lead her back to the cabin, forbidding himself to look back.

Chapter End Notes
I hope you enjoyed this chapter! It's been so long that I felt a little nervous posting it haha. I hope I haven't lost my touch :P Drop a comment if you liked it!
A million apologies for the long wait! I love and miss you guys! Thank you all for your inquiries and sweet words about the story. I promise to respond to each of your comments this evening. It means the world to me to hear what you all think of the story, so thank you again for being so kind and supportive!

I really hope you like this latest chapter :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I can’t believe how much he’s grown since I last saw him!” Dany crouched excitedly beside Little Sam where he played on the cabin floor. It was an uneventful afternoon, and the toddler was getting restless waiting for his mother to finish her worm and entertain him. But Dany was more than happy to occupy him while Gilly was busy with lunch.

“You’re going to be a big, strong boy aren’t you?” she asked sweetly. Little Sam babbled unintelligibly in answer, reaching out with chubby fists to tug on the long tendrils of Dany’s hair that hung loosely around her face.

“Sam!” Gilly scolded, turning from her place by the fire to flash her son a warning look.

“It’s alright,” Dany assured her, giggling at the innocent curiosity in Little Sam’s round, blue eyes. “I adore him. And it seems he won’t be so ‘little’ for much longer.”

“I know. It’s only been two weeks since I brought him to visit and still you see how big he’s got. Children grow fast when they’re this young,” Gilly said knowingly. “Too fast for me. I wish he would stay small like this, so I could always look after him.”

Gilly’s voice was somber, concern for her child written plainly in the crease of her brow and the strain in her eyes. And yet, Dany envied her. For as tiresome and frightening as motherhood must be, a part of her still regretted that she would never face those fears with children of her own.
She sighed, turning her attention back to Little Sam as he released her hair, instead clutching her hand with both of his. His palms were clumsy as he grabbed his way up the back of Dany’s hand and forearm. He was reaching higher, trying to pull himself up.

“I think he wants to stand,” Dany whispered to Gilly, careful not to startle or distract the little toddler as he took a fistful of her sleeve and yanked himself slowly to his feet.

“Oh, that’s good! Look at you,” Dany crooned, beaming. Little Sam’s bright eyes gazed up at her face, and he broke into a fit of delighted laughter. His gentle hold on her sleeve tightened as he steadied himself on his feet—a bit shuddery, but standing all the same. Gilly dropped the pot she’d been about to hang over the fire, and it tumbled, forgotten, to the floor with a clang. She hurried over and scooped the boy up, pulling him in a close, affectionate hug.

“That’s wonderful, Gilly,” she declared, voice muffled against Little Sam’s neck as she squeezed him lovingly. “Pretty soon, you’ll be standing tall as the Wall.”

Dany stood from the cold floor, swallowing the lump that had risen in her throat. Gilly’s joy moved her, and she was happy for her friend. But it made her heartsick to see the two of them like that, a family bound by ties of trust and love. It only made her more acutely aware that she was alone in the world, no family to call her own, and friends who came in and out of her life like tides on the shore. But she refused to let her melancholy sully the moment for Gilly.

“Me too,” Gilly agreed, grinning. “You’re going to be a great mother yourself one day. I can tell.”

Dany smiled grimly. No. The word teetered on her lips, poised to correct Gilly, to explain that she wouldn’t be a great mother. She wouldn’t be a mother of that sort at all. Only the Mother of Dragons. Only the mhysa who had failed at a parent’s first and most important duty: protecting those who relied on her.

It would have eased her burden to talk to Gilly about these things, to have someone she might open herself up to. But this wasn’t the time. Their brief acquaintance was about to come to an end, after all.

“I still can’t believe you’re leaving,” Dany lamented. She hoped to be making her own departure from Westeros soon enough. Even so, she hated to see Gilly go. She’d found friendship with the young girl, whose sunny disposition had seen Dany through all her recent, traumatic ordeals. It had been pleasant to have someone else around in the hut to disrupt the quiet of the forest—so different from the bustle of Meereen—and to share news about the outside world.

“Me neither.” Gilly shook her head. “It seems like only yesterday that Jon brought us here to see you, but it’s been some time, hasn’t it? I’ll miss you, My Lady. I think Little Sam will, too.”

Little Sam cooed contentedly in his mother’s arms as if in agreement.

“I’ll miss the both of you as well.”

“We haven’t got much choice in it, though. Sam’s got important work to see to at The Citadel. He’s finally going to become a maester. It’s what he’s always wanted, I know. But he says it’s a bad time to be going. There’s been no word from Stannis’s army for weeks. Everyone at Castle Black is getting worried. Jon was sending scouts toward Winterfell when I left today.”

Jon.
Dany swallowed hard, determined to remain impassive as Gilly spoke.

“I told him how well you’re doing now, and that I’d help if there was anything you needed. So Ghost won’t be coming back today. Jon’s sent him to protect the scouts.”

“Oh. I – um. Of course. I’m quite safe here,” Dany stammered. Apparently, all it took was the mention of Jon’s name, and she was stumbling over her words.

“Are you sure?” Gilly asked, scowling uncertainly.

She did her best to reassure her friend that she would be alright, and though Gilly seemed unconvinced, she and Little Sam took their leave all the same, returning to the castle to prepare for the journey to Oldtown. Dany put on a brave face and wished them both a fond farewell; but after they’d gone, there was nothing left to divert her troubled mind.

More than anything, she was angry. Angry at herself and her girlish fixation on the enigmatic Lord Commander. Dany was a woman grown, a queen, and she refused to act like a besotted maid. Not for anyone.

She’d built her seat of power without a partner to lean on. And if ever she required a man’s company, Daario waited for her across the sea. Daario was a strong man, a handsome man. A fool, of course, and an arrogant one at that. But a man who did his best to protect her and who showed her his own boorish kind of affection.

But though she wasn’t inclined to admit it, Dany knew that a hundred Daario’s couldn’t replicate the thrill she felt with Jon Snow.

She hadn’t intended it, but her attraction to the handsome young man had evolved from mild curiosity to pining after him all through the night. It wasn’t like her at all.

But that was before. Before he had drawn her in like a lamb to a wolf’s den.

Jon Snow had saved her from the edge of death. That alone left a mark, established a bond. But then he’d lingered, caring for her and doting on her, confiding in her and listening to her. For weeks Dany had watched as he did her favors that surpassed common courtesy, cast her glances that lasted just a breath too long for propriety. And every time Jon touched her, the contact carried the weight of a longing that remained unspoken.

Through it all Dany had come to know his character, too—to see the man beneath the Lord Commander’s cape. He was kind and generous, selfless to a fault. He was quiet and sensitive, but he spoke up when it counted and had a fierce courage and sense of justice.

For all those reasons Dany had felt herself developing feelings that went beyond mere gratitude when it came to Jon, and she’d welcomed them. She knew that she couldn’t go home to her people, not until she recovered. Not until she found Drogon. And after a lifetime of doing only what she must, what was expected of her, and what was best for others, Dany had found herself hurt and alone at the edge of the world. Her singular dedication as a queen had left her with a nasty scar and without a dragon. She still lacked the strength and the means to travel home, but until the time came, she’d hoped to find comfort and companionship in Jon’s arms. So once—just once—she’d dropped her defenses and fallen hard.

But that had been a mistake, she knew now.

In the past, Dany had always been careful to hold responsibility above the weakness of her own
heart. Her ambition kept her afloat after losing Drogo and Rhaego, after Jorah’s treachery. Through everything, she’d kept her sights firmly set on the Iron Throne. Between abolishing slavery in Essos and delivering her people to salvation, and returning to Westeros to reclaim her birthright and redeem her family name, Dany had allowed no time for emotional entanglements. And she wasn’t going to change that now.

No, there was nothing to gain from ‘what ifs,’ from thinking of what might have been with Jon. It was folly to wonder what had gone wrong, or why he had rejected her back in the woods. He’d offered Dany no explanation and had returned to Castle Black without another word to her, then or since.

But it made no matter. Dany didn’t have to rely on Jon. Not anymore. She’d been sent enough supplies to last two weeks at the least. Earlier that week, Gilly had removed the stitches from her leg, and Dany was more than well enough to walk on her own. Still, the thought of biding her time for weeks, alone in the little cabin, waiting for Jon or Drogon or anyone to show up . . . it made Dany feel powerless. She was a woman of action. She didn’t wait for things to happen, she made them happen.

So she decided to quit waiting, to waste no more time smothering inside the four, close walls of the cabin. It was time to leave, to find Drogon.

She recalled Gilly’s confidence earlier that day, her trust in Sam Tarly and their shared future at The Citadel. Gilly knew what to do to protect her family — and Dany needed to do the same. She was the Mother of Dragons, and her dragons had saved her before. At her most hopeless, her dragons had always found her. Weeks prior, Dany had dared to hope that Drogon was near when she’d heard the wildlings speak of him in the woods. Now it was her turn to find him.

Invigorated by her newfound objective, she pulled on her boots and a pair of ill-fitting leather gloves that Gilly had given her. She had no other clothing or belongings to her name, save the dress on her back and the jewelry she still wore from the day she’d escaped the city. She’d be cold outside with nothing but her dress, having returned Jon’s cloak to him at their last, awkward goodbye. But she would have to make do without it until she found Drogon somehow.

Dany paused then in the middle of the small room that had been her home for what felt like a long and meaningful time.

Her eyes rested on the rickety old table where she’d shared meals with Gilly and Little Sam and, yes, even Jon Snow. Her chest clinched sorrowfully at the memories. Ghost’s soft fur against her cheek as he dozed beside her at night. A comforting bowl of Gilly’s potato soup by the fire. Jon’s hands on her waist when he held her close out under the snow. His sullen expression, always in conflict with the light and warmth of his brown eyes.

They were good memories, but nothing more. If I look back, I am lost, Dany repeated firmly to herself. And with that, she ventured out into the cold forest alone.

Memory led her from the cabin to the path through the trees, the same one she’d walked with Jon before. When she found it, an internal compass she couldn’t explain steered her left, deeper into the wilderness, away from civilization, from the castle and the northernmost villages and holdfasts. Toward the Wall.
Using the path made the first leg of her journey a smooth one. The snowfall was shallow, and no branches or roots encumbered her as she walked along. But when about an hour had passed Dany thought she heard voices in the air. It was only the faintest bit of sound—clearly far away—and she told herself it was just a bird calling. Never mind that she had yet to see any birds, or any animals at all, for that matter. The forest was quiet and still as ever.

But even if the voices were human, Dany couldn’t justify leaving the relative safety of a marked path. If she got lost in the frozen woods, suspicious sounds would be the least of her worries.

So she pressed on, the air getting seemingly colder and thinner the longer she walked; and as the cheery midday sun began to sink nearer the treetops, her confidence in this impulsive plan begin to waver every-so-slightly.

What if she didn’t find Drogon today? Could she even find her way back to the cabin on her own? Would the snow flurries have covered her tracks by then? And if so, what could she possibly do? If she spent the night out in the elements without shelter, it’d be the last thing she ever did. That much she knew beyond a doubt.

Before she could imagine more nightmarish scenarios, Dany rounded a bend in the path and was stopped short by the sight of two figures in the distance. Two men, side-by-side on the road, heading in her direction. The man on the left looked right at her and froze, mouth ajar. But his companion didn’t notice a thing, instead staring at the ground to pick his way along the snowy path, humming a tune to himself. That’s what I heard before, Dany thought, sparing a moment to regret that she hadn’t erred on the side of caution and left the path after all.

The oblivious stranger took two more leisurely steps before he was finally alerted to her presence.

“Threm. Threm! Stop walking, you great oaf!” his companion called, voice clipped with tension.

The man called Threm halted, eyes darting up to find Dany at last.

“Who’s that?” he asked, befuddled.

“Like I bloody know,” the other answered impatiently. “Oy!” he called, jutting his chin in Dany’s general direction. “Who are you?”

She eyed them both in stony silence. At first glance, they weren’t necessarily what she’d call sinister. The one named Threm only just matched her own height, his fur cap failing to entirely hide his unkempt, fiery orange hair. His face was plain and unremarkable, save for a spattering of freckles and spotty stubble. He looked nervous, his mouth set in a crooked line of worry. His companion was taller and broader, his head shaved close, but his greying brown beard was long and bushy, hiding most of his face from Dany’s view.

Both men were dressed only in thick-looking furs to ward off the cold—none of the armor or combat gear befitting soldiers. Each carried an axe, and the sight of the well-sharpened blades jogged her memory. Loggers, hired out by Jon to fetch wood for the Night’s Watch. The same two dolts who had interrupted her walk with Jon before. They’d seemed harmless to her then, almost silly. Even so, the axes could just as well cut her down, and Dany’s heart hammered out a warning at their approach.

"You lost?" Threm asked, squinting at her.
The tall one scoffed.

"Awful far from town to be lost. Seems to me she means to be here," he murmured, frown deepening.

Dany scowled right back, shifting the weight off her bad leg and crossing her arms defiantly over her chest.

“No,” she said simply.

"That true, girl?” he pried. “You come out here on purpose? Maybe you're one o' them whores the Crows sneak off to see in the night, eh? You look the part well enough."

“Hush up, Jaritt,” Threm advised. “Hurt her feelings, and you’ll never get to sample her wares.” He wagged his brows lasciviously at Dany.

In any other circumstance, their rudeness would have outraged Dany, but fear had a way of shoving all baser emotions aside. After a lifetime of being exploited by men, she was practiced at placating them, a veteran of survival. She knew better than to show them anxiety or anger.

Their intentions still weren’t clear, but even if the two wildlings meant her no harm, they’d seen her. Her hair wasn’t covered or concealed, and even without her unconventional appearance, a woman alone in the woods this far North was more than a passing oddity. On the off chance that Dany was able to convince them to let her pass unhindered, they’d carry the story of what they’d seen back to Castle Black, where it would surely spread through the ranks of the wildlings and Night’s Watch men alike. Jon himself would be unable to contain the tale.

While Dany stood there considering her next move, Jaritt flashed her a sneer even his beard couldn’t hide. It was familiar and terrifying—the predatory sort of look she’d encountered on the faces of many other men before.

She weighed her options carefully. If she turned and fled back down the path the way she’d come, she’d never outrun them. After so many weeks sequestered in the tiny cabin, her muscles were stiff and unused. Her leg was still healing and tender to the touch. Over-exerting herself wasn’t a good idea but darting off the path was equally problematic. Away from the road the snow was deeper, the trees and brush thicker. It would be harder to run and easier to get lost.

But if instinct alone had guided her this far, it would show her the way again. It had to.

Without further deliberation, Dany leapt off the path to her left. One of the wildlings swore loudly behind her, and then the pattering of footsteps sounded as they made chase, following her into the density of the forest.

But Dany didn’t dare throw a glance over her shoulder. The way before her was perilous—obstructed by roots that hid beneath blankets of snow, low-hanging branches that reached out to scratch her face or catch in her hair.

So she watched her feet and ran, ran like something hunted, ignoring the sharp pain that soon shot through her scarred thigh. A stitch formed in her side and there were needles in her throat and chest from gulping breaths of dry, icy air. She paid it no mind, driving forward even as her feet grew numb from the snow.

After a time, though, even Dany’s indomitable will wasn’t enough to keep breath in her lungs and strength in her steps. She had to stop, even if only for a moment. After one, hasty peep over her shoulder showing no sign of her assailants, she threw herself behind a nearby tree for cover.
In the silence that followed, the extent of her exhaustion fell on her like a heavy rain, and Dany hunched over breathlessly, bracing her hands against her thighs as she struggled to regulate her breathing, to allay the stinging of her frigid nose and cheeks.

After a moment she righted herself and gazed up ahead, surprised to see the dark mouth of a cave peeking out of the trees in the distance. The cave was set into the side of a hill, its depths too dark and murky for her to discern. But Dany could see that the entrance was just large enough to accommodate a dragon—if he tucked back his wings, of course.

Relief spread through her overworked muscles and achy joints, and Dany marched on through the snow toward her destination with renewed vigor.

_Drogon._ It was the perfect place for him to remain hidden and out of the way, to find some warm respite from the Winter. A gentle breeze swept by from behind her, rustling the barren branches of the surrounding trees and carrying her scent ahead and into the cave.

Before Dany could get close enough to see inside, the ground began to quake beneath her boots, accompanied by the deep thud of a footstep, loud as thunder. She smiled softly to herself, almost breaking into a jog in her eagerness.

“Drogon,” she whispered, her eyes welling with emotion. It had been agonizing waiting to find him, wondering what had become of him out here in a strange place all alone. The notion that she was finally going to see him again put an extra spring in her tired steps. But before she reached the safety and cover of the cavern there came a rustle in the bushes behind her, the crunch of booted feet in the densely-packed snow.

“What the bloody hell is makin’ that noise?” Threm yelled from her flank, voice quavering with fear.

“Hush up, Threm,” Jaritt commanded, before calling out loudly to Dany. “We only want to talk to you, girl! Stop bloody running.”

No, Dany thought, her head swimming with a nauseous dread. She was so close. They couldn’t catch her, not now. And if they saw Drogon? It would be disastrous. _The moment they leave this forest, she told herself grimly, they’ll tell._ Of course they would. They’d tell, and someone, somewhere would alert the Lannisters. If she was still in Westeros when that happened, it would be the end of her, Dany knew. Even Drogon’s wrath couldn’t lay waste to the whole of the Lannister forces and their allies combined. They’d take Drogon, capture him and dispose of her. She couldn’t allow it. She wouldn’t. There was still so much more she had to do.

And there wasn’t only her own safety to consider. It would spell trouble for the Lord Commander if his brothers in the Night’s Watch discovered that he’d been harboring a woman wanted by the Crown, that he’d hidden knowledge of a dangerous dragon from his own men. And resist though she might, Dany found that she still cared very much about Jon’s wellbeing.

It didn’t have to come to that, though. She still had a chance, so long as she made it inside before Threm and Jaritt overtook her. If she could get to Drogon in time, they could leave, fly far away where the Lannisters could never reach her. That way even if anyone were to listen to the tall tale the two wildlings spun of a silver-haired girl and her giant dragon, there would be no proof to substantiate their claims. They’d be dismissed as silly, superstitious country folk from beyond the Wall.

She was only seconds from salvation when drawn forth by his mother’s approach and fear, Drogon
stepped out from the cave and into view, his colossal silhouette looming up before her, staggering in
its height. His frightful, crimson stare swept straight past her as he stood up, focusing instead on the
men running in her wake.

Dany nervously followed his gaze. She wouldn’t let the wildlings be killed, not if she could help it.
She didn’t want innocent blood on her hands, and though they’d chased her, to her knowledge the
two men hadn’t committed any crime.

She turned back to Drogon and made a mad dash for him, gathering her skirts in her hands and
running haphazardly over the uneven, snow-covered ground. She had nothing to fear from the
wildlings now, not with a dragon to protect her. No, now she feared for them. She knew what might
happen now that Drogon had laid eyes on them both. And they’d seen him, too; that much was clear
from the sharp gasps that came from behind her, the horrified swearing that ensued.

_Run, Dany thought. Run away and save yourselves. It won’t matter what you’ve seen when I’m long
gone._

But Threm and Jaritt didn’t flee. They stood rooted to the ground, immobilized by shock at the sight
of Drogon. He was near enough then that Dany could see the faint light glistening on his ebony
scales, the long points of his fangs, and when he growled, she could feel the vibration in her very
bones.

Another step, another, and she could nearly touch him if she stretched an arm out before her. It was
then she felt the strong pull of air that whipped her hair forward around her face. Drogon’s mouth
opened wide enough to swallow a man whole as he sucked in a deep breath. He was going to attack
them.

Dany spun on her heel to face the wildlings, to warn them. They were only a few yards behind, still
staring as the dragon towered above them, oblivious to their doom.

“Get out of the way!” she screamed helplessly. No sooner had the words left her lips than she was
blindsided by a gust of air from the dragon’s maw, so powerful it brought her to her knees.

At that moment, another voice called out. A third voice that belonged to neither of the wildlings, but
was familiar all the same.

“Duck! Get down, now!”

_Jon?!_

Dany struggled in vain to stand just as the blast of Drogon’s flames engulfed her, swirling around in
an inferno of destructive, choking heat. The air itself seemed to ignite as the force of his breath
knocked her violently back down in the roiling sludge that moments before had been snow.

But her hair didn’t burn on her head. Her skin didn’t blister or scorch. Dany had suspected that once
again, she would escape the fire unscathed—and she was right. But a dragon’s fire was still
exceptionally strong, and the heat was painfully oppressive in its intensity. Drogon continued to
exhale a wall of flame over her. Trapped there, it felt like an eternity to Dany before he ceased at last.

The moment the dragon stopped to take a breath, Dany got to her feet with difficulty, stumbling over
the tatters of her singed and ruined dress, sliding around in the muddy snowmelt beneath her feet.

She coughed and sputtered, choking on the smoke-blackened air as she hobbled forward. She was
confused, terrified, silently praying to whatever gods there be that she’d been wrong. Perhaps she’d
heard someone else, a wildling overseer come to reign in his unruly subordinates. Or maybe there
had never been a third man at all, just a trick of her imagination at the height of her distress. Any other explanation would suffice, just so long as it wasn’t Jon’s voice she’d heard.

A handful of clumsy steps brought her to the place where Threm and Jaritt had stood. Either they’d been incinerated entirely or they’d escaped harm somehow, for they were nowhere to be seen. But up ahead there was a dark shape obscured by the smoke, upright but still as a statue.

“Jon?” Dany asked, waving her hand before her in a vain attempt to sweep the smog and steam away. “Is that you? Are you alright?”

For an interminable moment, there was no sound, and Dany feared the worst. It must have been Jon after all, and he’d been burned along with the others, turned into a pillar of ash where he’d stood. Surely he’d crumple into nothing the moment she reached him, and—

“Daenerys!” he croaked suddenly, startling Dany so that she nearly lost her footing on the slippery ground. Tears of relief sprung to her eyes, clouding her already-murky vision.

“I’m here,” she rasped in answer. “I’m here.”

“Are you hurt?” Jon asked anxiously, his voice nearer.

Before she could reply, Dany recognized the telltale sounds of Drogon inhaling for another assault behind her, and she wheeled around in a panic, forcing her scratchy throat to project up to Drogon’s great height.

“Drogon, no!” she ordered, with every ounce of authority she could muster. She held up a hand to halt the dragon’s advance. “No,” she repeated. After a second’s hesitation and a doubtful look past her at Jon, Drogon submitted obediently. He lowered his head, but not without a soft, indignant snort.

Turning back, Dany was met with the welcome sight of a dirty and disheveled Jon, now almost within arm’s reach.

He trudged through the knee-deep mire of melted snow and scorched earth, his eyes wide with awe. He halted only once they were toe-to-toe, and Dany had to fight down the urge to throw her arms around him, so potent was her relief at seeing him alive and unharmed. All the while Jon was shifting his gaze back and forth from her face to Drogon just behind her, gawking like a blind man seeing the sun for the first time.

“Seven hells, Daenerys,” he swore, shaking his head slowly. “That’s a . . . a dragon. And you. I thought you were dead. It burned you. I thought—How? I—” His voice broke and he gave up trying to speak altogether, instead lifting a trembling hand to touch the side of her face, as if to convince himself that she was real.

Dany reached up to rest her palm over his against her cheek. “Me?” she whispered, smiling at him through teary eyes. “I—”

She fell silent when Jon slid his fingers to her chin and then tilted her soot-stained face up to his. She searched his eyes, her breath catching when she noticed something different darkening them—a desire to match her own, unshackled from his prior doubts and reservations. All at once, like a dam giving way, Jon’s other hand was on her lower back, drawing her urgently up against him, and he dipped his head down to kiss her.

Dany’s initial shock at this wholly unexpected move was quickly replaced with excitement. For all his solemn manners in the past, she had imagined gentle, polite kisses from Jon—careful and
guarded, softer than Qartheen silk. She couldn’t have been further off the mark.

Perhaps it was their close scrape with grave danger that had Jon’s blood up, but he was like a man possessed. He slanted his mouth against hers roughly, the fullness of his lower lip slipping between her own. Without hesitation Dany skirted her tongue across it, tasting the smoke and ash on his lips and earning a low, appreciative groan from Jon.

A tiny part of her wondered why he had even shown up here in the first place, and she had half a mind to put a stop to it, to pull away and demand an explanation for his snub the last time she’d seen him. She was not what those wildlings had insinuated, some tart waiting around with a ready supply of affection whenever the great Lord Commander needed company. Reasonably she ought to send Jon back the way he’d come and do what she’d set out to do in the first place: take Drogon back across the sea.

But Dany found that part of her was silenced by her pulse roaring in her ears, by every nerve in her body singing with pleasure at the touch of Jon’s hands and the firm press of his lips. She gave into it, let her heart run away with her. It felt so good to be held so by someone she wanted, someone that wanted her back. The rush, the dizzy, breathless thrill of getting to know the taste and smell and feel of another person. To trust Jon with this intimacy and be rewarded so completely by his warmth—a familiar warmth that was pleasant even when she was already sweating in the sweltering aftermath of Drogon’s fire.

She wrapped her arms snug around him, twining her fingers in the curls of hair at the nape of his neck. Jon shivered under her touch and deepened the kiss, sucking her tongue greedily into his mouth.

When they broke apart for half a heartbeat, gasping for air, he shifted her in his arms as his hands ventured lower, nearly lifting her off the ground to meld her body closer to his. Their noses bumped awkwardly when he leaned in to kiss her again and Dany giggled against his chapped lips at the absurdity of it all. It wasn’t perfect or romantic the way she’d envisioned it’d be. Her clothes were nearly all burned away and they were both caked in mud and ash. There was a dragon at her back and two missing men to worry about.

Yet all of that seemed awfully insignificant when Jon was pressing hurried, wet kisses lower and lower, searing a path from her kiss-swollen lips down to the sensitive flesh over her clavicle. He was all lips and tongue and hands, pauseing only long enough to catch a finger of his glove between his teeth to yank it off.

His palm was hot against her chest as he fumbled with what little remained of the top of her gown, her breasts spilling free under his hands. And then his mouth was there too, tracing ever-smaller circles around her nipples and suckling them gently between his teeth to yank it off.

For a man forbidden from lying with women, Jon was remarkably good at guessing exactly where and how to touch her. Dany couldn’t recall a time she’d ever wanted someone more. She was mad for him, and already a pressure was building deep in her belly, and only he could provide her release. What scraps of her smallclothes had survived the flames were soaked through with sweat and arousal and she found herself grinding shamelessly against Jon’s knee that had at some point shoved up between her legs.

She felt him grin at that, lips still pressed to her chest, and he trailed his palm down to the seam of her thighs. With only a few bits of charred material left to the skirt of her dress, there was almost nothing to buffer the friction of Jon’s fingers against her sex, his flesh brushing hers teasingly through the holes in her clothes.
But it wasn’t enough, and Dany wanted desperately for him to slip those fingers underneath the damned smalls and touch her properly. She might have told him as much, begged him even, if she could have managed a coherent thought or word.

Instead, she snaked her hand between them, groping for the hardness of Jon’s erection. But the graze of her fingertips seemed to startle him back to reality and he exhaled sharply, catching her hand with his own and pulling it away. With a long, shuddering breath, Jon straightened his posture and stepped back so they were no longer touching at all.

Dany’s first instinct was an embarrassed sort of rage. That Jon had the audacity to tempt her this way and then put an end to it again beggared belief, and she folded her arms over her exposed chest in a huff. But after a minute in the absence of his heady, intoxicating warmth she slowly came to her senses. This was neither the place or time for the passionate frenzy escalating between them.

Her eyes flicked up ruefully to find Jon looking her up and down, apparently taking stock of her near-nakedness for the first time. He shook his head with exaggerated disapproval.

“This is becoming a bit of a pattern, Daener--,”

“Dany,” she corrected him quickly, surprising even herself with the informality of it. It had been years since anyone had called her that, but she craved this intimacy with Jon.

The day they’d met, he’d seen a girl who needed help, not a queen or highborn lady. He was the first person in years to meet her simply as a woman first, to get to know her as herself without all of the political strategizing and etiquette. That honesty formed the budding attraction that still blazed between them. And after the way he’d just kissed her, it seemed only natural that they address one another as equals. Not a Lord Commander and the Queen of Meereen. Just Jon and Dany.

“Alright. Dany,” he assented, his lips curling into a grin that made her flush. “I was going to ask if you’re always in some state of undress.”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” she teased, quirking a brow at him.

“Aye,” Jon answered in a low voice. His expression sobered slightly as he stepped in closer. “Maybe I would. If you stay here long enough for me to find out.”

A smile flickered across Dany’s face but she sensed the joke was over now. The gravity of their predicament was already elbowing its way back into both their minds. She could see that much from the way Jon avoided her bared chest with his eyes. He unfastened the cloak from around his neck and slid it off his back, wrapping it warmly round her shoulders.

“Stay,” he murmured. “In the North with me, if only for a bit longer. Please.”

Dany cleared her throat uncomfortably, glancing over her shoulder at Drogon, who had curled up in the mud behind them, still regarding them both with a watchful eye. It frightened her to hear the sincerity in Jon’s voice. It frightened her more that she wished to do as he asked—to push her troubles aside and remain with him at the edge of the world. But that could never be.

“You’ll have to take that up with my dragon, Jon Snow. I don’t think Drogon is very fond of this Winter climate.” It was a poor deflection, but the best she could manage just then. It was difficult to think critically with Jon standing so close, the memory of his touch still fresh on her skin.

He glanced over her shoulder at her jest, his eyes widening slightly as they assessed the big dragon once again. Jon had, apparently, forgotten he was even there. But the sight of Drogon didn’t seem to deter him.
“I’d take on all your dragons if that’s what it took to keep you here.”

Dany scoffed, shaking her head.

“I’m serious, Jon. I cannot stay here.”

“I’m serious, too. I know how it sounds,” he persisted, “but—,”

“But nothing,” Dany interrupted. “What you ask is impossible. I have people to look after. So many people. They need me. They’re counting on me to free them, to keep them safe. I cannot linger here when they are suffering. And you! You’re—”

“I’m Lord Commander,” Jon finished sullenly.

“Yes,” Dany agreed, nodding. “And those men. The ones that followed me here today? They’ll tell others, and people will come looking for me. They’ll come after me and they’ll question your leadership for protecting me.”

“I won’t let that happen,” Jon protested fiercely. “I won’t let anyone hurt you. I swear it. Those two are harmless. I only came here today looking for them. They’d been out here ‘chopping wood’ all day and they’ve got a reputation as drunks and troublemakers. The only reason they were sent here is that their leader doesn’t trust them with more important work. No one will believe anything they say. But I’ll find them and order them to keep quiet anyway, and—”

“You can’t control everything all the time, Jon,” Dany insisted. “I tried to, and it’s how I nearly died. Word will spread. I can’t be here when that happens. Someone will get hurt.”

He watched her silently for a moment, and a melancholy she’d seen before overcame his features.

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Dany whispered. There was nothing left to say, so she stepped forward and hugged Jon tightly. He sighed and returned her embrace, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. Nuzzling her face into the side of his neck, she savored the scent of his leather jerkin, the sweat on his skin. It broke her heart to think that one day she might forget these little details—the safe contentment of his arms around her, his smell, his voice.

She’d grown to love Drogo in her own way; in hindsight she knew it had been a matter of survival, caring for him as she had. Daario, too, seemed inevitable—a necessary comfort in her loneliness, an escape. Jon was different. They’d chosen one another. No bargaining, no games. Nothing for either of them to gain and everything to lose in their coupling yet still, still she wanted him.

They would do their duty. Both of them, just as they always did. But she wasn’t ready to say goodbye to him just yet.

Prying herself reluctantly back, Dany blinked away the tears in her eyes.

“Don’t look so glum,” she scolded Jon, putting on her most winning smile. She took him by the hand and turned to face Drogon, who’d lifted his head curiously behind them. “You’re a lucky man, after all. You’re about to meet a dragon.”

Chapter End Notes
Thanks for reading! We've got at least four chapters this length left to go. Please drop me a comment if you liked it and thanks for sticking by me and this story. :)
Hey, everyone! Sorry for an unbelievably long hiatus. Instead of offering excuses I'll just offer an apology. I'm sorry it takes me so long to update this fic, but we're nearing the finish line and I'm committed to seeing this through! For those readers still with me, I appreciate you more than you can imagine.

Thank you as always to @dracarysqueen/LadyTarg for beta services and making my banners! Enjoy!

When Jon was a boy at Winterfell, he’d been just as captivated by Old Nan’s fanciful stories of magic and monsters as the younger Stark children, only he’d been less inclined to show it. Despite his predisposition to sulking in the corner while the others gathered wide-eyed and anxious around Old Nan’s feet, Jon still used to listen with as much fascination as any of them. On some nights he’d sit next to Robb, his knees tucked up under his chin, hanging on every word of the woman’s terrifying tales with a mixture of fear and excitement. Yet always, in the back of his mind, he’d known that many of Nan’s stories were made-up. Legends meant to scare children into obedience or occupy their active imaginations.

As a man grown who’d ventured beyond the Wall, Jon discovered that most of those farfetched, made-up stories were more real than he’d ever deemed possible. But even after fighting wights and Others, even after taming a direwolf, Jon had never thought he’d see a dragon in the flesh. After everything he’d experienced, he’d begun to suspect that only the bad stories were true.

So eyeing Dany’s enormous, black dragon up close was overwhelming, even for Jon’s battle-tested bravery.

Dany seemed entirely oblivious to his awe as she stood by Drogon, speaking to the dragon in a low voice, her pleasant tones enunciating a language Jon could not understand.
“Iksan biare nyke ūndegon ao, Drōgon. Ziry iksos issare sīr bōsa,” she crooned, her fingers trailing lazily over the shimmery obsidian scales on the beast’s neck.

Jon hadn’t the slightest idea what Dany was saying, but listening to the way her sweet lips formed the strange and unfamiliar words and watching her reduce the world’s greatest killing machine to a pliant and loving pet at her touch . . . he could feel the fire in his loins kindling anew. There was something primal and entrancing about the way she tamed the beast, the fearlessness in her amethyst eyes. She was just a tiny thing, really—short, slender, and non-threatening in every way. But when she faced down a giant dragon like it was simple as training a common cur, Jon could see the fierce, proud queen inside the kind woman he’d come to know and care for.

Whatever Dany was saying, Drogon seemed to respond to it. The dragon leaned affectionately toward her touch in a gesture that reminded Jon oddly of Ghost. He took courage in that. After all, to many, Ghost was as terrifying as any beast. If Jon could train tame a direwolf, could he not merely pat a dragon?

He raised his hand up before the creature’s great nostrils, marveling at the moist, hot breath that blew against his palm with every exhalation. Like holding my hand over a cookfire, Jon thought in amazement, a barely perceptible tremor running down his arm.

His better judgment rose to challenge his fascination, and while part of him was enraptured by the beast before him, another part was crying out for him to tear his hand away, to turn and flee as any sane man would before the deadly dragon. It defied all logic for him to reach out as he did, to want to feel those dark, shiny scales. But some frivolous desire to remain brave before the Dragon Queen held him rooted to the spot.

Warily, Jon raised his eyes to meet Drogon’s, staring into the ruby-red orbs, transfixed. The dragon looked back at him without hostility, but even the air around them seemed a warning, bearing the heavy scent of the undergrowth that had been scorched to nothing only moments before. Wispy grey tendrils of smoke floated before Jon’s eyes with every one of the beast’s steady breaths.

He felt his courage beginning to waver when Drogon unexpectedly closed the last few inches that separated them. Lowering his head, the dragon pressed his wide snout to the tips of Jon’s fingers with a little snort of impatience.

Something between a gasp and a laugh bubbled out through Jon’s lips as the big dragon closed his startling red eyes with contentment. It only took a few seconds of Jon’s hesitant patting before Drogon relaxed into his hand in what could only be described as a nuzzle. It was more familiarity and affection than Jon ever expected to find in a dragon and it was all he could do to keep his arm from shaking as he felt the scales beneath his palm, somehow rough and smooth at once.

Dany’s own hand fell to her side and she turned to peer at Jon, astounded. “I’ve never seen anyone do something like that,” she marveled, her eyes blown wide.

Drogon shrunk back after a moment, moving away to resume his earlier, comfortable spot at the edge of the clearing. He turned around in a circle once before curling up and plopping down to lie in the mud. If not for the thud that shook the ground beneath their feet, the action might have resembled that of a wolf or a dog—not at all the ruthless monster Jon had envisioned as a boy.

But while Jon was beaming exuberantly at his newfound friend, Dany looked almost disturbed at the ease with which he had just touched her dragon, without injury or incident.

“It’s almost as if . . . as if he knows you.”
“I’m sorry,” Jon offered, feeling suddenly as though he had intruded. “I didn’t mean to interrupt you.”

“Don’t apologize,” Dany interjected. “I’m impressed.”

Jon scoffed, shaking his head. Yet he had to admit that the dragon’s reaction to his presence went against everything he’d ever heard, read, or imagined about them. Even now, he felt a sort of connection with Drogon, his uncertainty abated.

“You keep surprising me,” Dany mused, her lips curling upward proudly.

You’re the surprising one, Jon thought, trying ignore the skip of his heart at the sight of her smile, the dimples forming on each side of her pretty mouth.

“Pleasant surprises, I hope.”

“Yes. I don’t think you understand how grateful I am,” Dany continued.

“For helping you in the woods? I’ve only done what any honest person would—,”

“That isn’t what I mean. I’d been warned about the way people were going to react when I arrived here. I know the people of Westeros abhor Targaryens.” Dany paused then, her eyes falling to her scuffed, dirty boots. She looked sad, and that pained Jon more than it should have. He wanted to erase her past and replace it with a proper childhood like his sisters had had at Winterfell, full of warmth and love and belonging. He hadn’t really enjoyed such a life himself, but his own youth at least featured some happy memories. Pilfering sweets from the kitchens with Arya; horse races across the moors with Robb; teaching Bran how to hold a bow. Dany had nothing but running and hiding and begging, if he had the truth of it. And now that she was a woman grown she would spend the rest of her life righting the wrongs of men who’d blackened her name before she was even born. She deserved better. He wished he could give it to her.

“As a girl I believed the fool stories those honey-tongued men told my brother,” Dany went on quietly. “That people from Dorne to The Wall drank our health and sewed scarlet dragon banners in secret. Now, I know better, that the realm hated my father and resents me still for the war he caused.”

“Aye, that’s true of many of the smallfolk, I’m sure. Some high lords, too. But anyone with learning knows that there were good men in your family as well,” Jon assured her. “We looked up to them as children. I’d play with wooden swords in the yard with my brother, Robb. Aemon the Dragonknight and Daeron the Young Dragon. I wanted more than anything to be like them. They were great heroes, respected and remembered.”

He couldn’t help wondering what he might be remembered for. The Lord Commander who betrayed the Watch by welcoming wildlings through its gates? The bastard boy who tried—and failed—to lead his people through the Long Night? He envied those famous men, even some of Dany’s doomed forefathers. In the songs the heroes always knew what to do when it mattered most.

“Aemon was one of my favorites,” Dany sighed wistfully. “Viserys sometimes told me stories of our ancestors when we were children and I would always ask him to tell me about Aemon, even though he’d already recounted the tale a thousand times before. He was a great man, a young Lord Commander, a bit like you.” She glanced up to smile shyly at Jon before continuing. “He was in love with his sister Naerys, but he could not have her. It was forbidden, so he joined the kingsguard to remain at her side. I always thought it romantic.”

She fell silent then, watching Jon thoughtfully, a little crease forming on her brow as she mulled
something over. “I suppose you find that repulsive. The Targaryen custom of loving within our bloodline.”

Jon resisted the urge to laugh at that. As if he were in any place to pass moral judgment on who one chose to lay with. After he’d broken his vows, who he’d broken them with. The way he still deceived his brothers even now to be standing here with Dany.

“No,” he answered. “We don’t choose who we love.”

“Spoken like a man well-acquainted with matters of the heart,” she observed, taking a small step closer. Her approach set his pulse to racing again, and if it weren’t for Drogon’s watchful, crimson eye on him Jon might have seized her and kissed that little smile from her lips. He could still taste the sweetness of her on his tongue from before, and even dusted with soot and caked in mud she was a vision, her tattered dress doing little to protect her modesty from his gaze.

“Have you ever been in love?” she asked, her unusual, beautiful purple eyes imploring.

Yes, Jon thought, jumbled images of Ygritte’s teasing smirk and unruly red hair playing across his memory.

“I loved a wildling girl. But I had to leave her behind and rejoin my brothers at the Wall.” Jon hesitated, assessing Dany’s expression. Even she must have known how shameful it was for a man of the Night’s Watch to lie with a woman, let alone a wildling woman. But she didn’t react as he’d predicted. She only listened, her lips set in a thoughtful frown. “She died in the wildling attack on Castle Black a year ago.”

Dany cleared her throat in the quiet, and instead of the usual, piteous refrain—I’m sorry—she simply nodded.

“My husband died as well, and my son. They were murdered.” She held her head high as she spoke, and he could see that the memories hurt her, but grief hadn’t broken her down. There was steel in her voice instead of a widow’s sorrow.

Loss hadn’t broken Jon either. Not quite. Not yet. But then, his story was full of violence and deceit, nothing like those Dany had read as a girl.

Yes, Jon might have loved Ygritte. But not like Aemon and Naerys, he thought, studying Dany. Not like I feel for you.

The words were on his tongue, so easy to say. Jon yearned to speak them, to fall to his knees in the muck and open his heart to her. He could tell her how his whole world had shifted on its axis the day she’d stumbled into his path, how he thought of her ceaselessly night and day. He could describe the future he wished they might share, a world with no frightening monsters beyond the Wall. A place where the titles of “bastard” and “queen” meant nothing, no oaths or rules to separate them, where the only vows he’d swear before the Heart Tree were the ones that bound them together as man and wife. A world where he could love her without shame and give her children that bore his name and her beauty.

But that story would never be told. It was further flung than the most feverish fantasies Old Nan had ever dreamt up.

“That was the night my dragons were born,” Dany added. “They’re my children now. They’re my responsibility, like my people. Now that I know where to find Drogon I must return to Meereen. Soon. Perhaps even tomorrow.”
“Yes,” Jon agreed solemnly. He’d known Dany’s journey home was imminent, but it made it no easier to hear her discuss it. “But maybe not as you are right now.”

Peeking down at herself, at the shreds of once-blue, soiled fabric hanging about her, Dany grinned. Jon’s cloak, still thrown over her shoulders, wasn’t enough to substitute for real clothing, and she would need something more practical to fly in.

“You raise a good point, Jon, but I’ve nothing else to wear. Do you propose to dress me?”

Jon chuckled, taking her by the hand. “Aye, but I quite enjoy seeing you like this.”

Dany blushed slightly, feigning offense. “How very brash of you, Lord Commander.”

Twisting around to Drogon, she said something in that strange, exotic tongue again. “Umbagon kesīr, Drōgon. Kesan māzigon arī syt ao.”

“What did you say?” Jon inquired as they started back toward the trail, arm-in-arm.

Dany giggled, shrugging innocently. “I told him to eat you if you try anything fresh, of course.”

Back in the cabin, Dany relaxed cross-legged on the big bearskin rug near the warmth of the roaring fire and Jon sat facing her. They shared a meal of some of the provisions he’d left her before—salt pork and winter pears.

The cabin had taken on something of a homey feel for Jon ever since Dany had taken up residence there, and having dinner with her now, passing his wineskin back and forth, Jon could almost imagine that it was a home, not just for him but for Dany, too.

But the conversation didn’t flow as freely as it once had. Knowledge of Dany’s departure cast a pall over them both and he found it harder and harder to ignore the silence settling between them. Only the crackling of the fire and the light tapping of a snow-laden tree branch against the window sounded in the cabin’s single room.

He was relieved when Dany was the one to speak at last.

“You can use the basin first, if you’d like,” she offered, motioning to the water basin against the wall. Before their meal Jon had tended to his horse and then helped Dany to bring in pails of snow to melt and heat over the fire. He’d acquired his fair share of filth out in the clearing before, but Dany was worse off. If it was possible, she was even more in need of a bath than she had been on that first, fateful day when he’d found her out in the forest, and her clothes were in an even sorrier state. If anyone deserved the first go at the hot water, it was her.

“I brought that snow in for you,” he urged. “I expect you’ll want to get some of that mud out of your hair before you change clothes.”

Dany groaned, looking about the room as he spoke until her eyes fell on a little canvas bag at the foot of her bed. “I’ll need to try another of those gowns that Gilly left me. From the brothel.”

Jon was decidedly more intrigued by this prospect than she was, desire coiling low in his belly at the memory of her in the blue dress when it was still intact, all tight and indecent.
“Well, at the very least, it’ll be preferable to what you’ve got on now,” he said encouragingly.

“And not quite so overcooked,” Dany added with a smirk.

Rising from his spot on the rug Jon hoisted the pail off its hook hanging by the fire and emptied the hot water into the basin.

“It’s ready now, if you’d like.”

She got up and fished a washrag from her bag before joining Jon at the basin. Dipping a finger into the water to test it, she let out a little hum of pleasure at the temperature.

“It’s perfect,” she reported, submerging the rag in the steaming basin happily. “Thank you.”

Jon nodded, trying to tear his eyes away from her grateful smile. It was the right time to take his leave, he knew. He could reasonably invent a reason to return once more on the morrow, to bring her something warmer for her flight home. But for now propriety dictated that he leave her to bathe in peace and return to the castle before everyone slept and his arrival caused a stir among the guards.

Dany had already shed his cape, which hung tidily on the back of a chair at the table, and Jon reluctantly turned to retrieve it and make ready to head back. But Dany reached for him with her free hand, catching him by the wrist before he could walk away.

“Here,” she insisted. “Let me.”

She guided him around to face her again and lifted the hot cloth to his brow, gently wiping away the layer of grime that had accumulated there with gentle, careful strokes.

“Can’t have the Lord Commander returning to his post looking so suspicious,” she explained, dipping the rag back into the water to clean it. “Imagine the colorful stories they’d invent about your absence if you turn up looking darker than a Dothraki.”

He snorted softly at that, and thankful for the excuse to remain awhile longer, surrendered himself to her care. She wrung out the cloth and reapplied it to his skin, the heat soothing, the steam lulling him into a calm contentment.

It was a simple act, Dany cleaning his face, yet Jon realized that it was the first time anyone had ever done such a thing for him. He’d never had a mother, after all. And Lady Stark had been more likely to drown him in a basin than bathe him with one. So something about the selflessness of the gesture made Jon’s heart tug unpleasantly as he gazed down at Dany’s concentration. She was so unfailingly compassionate, her heart as good as it was strong. And he was going to lose her.

“There,” she said, dropping the rag into the water with a splash and looking up to scrutinize Jon’s face. “Definitely an improvement. You look quite handsome now, though I can hardly take credit for that.”

He scoffed self-derisively. Even now, he couldn’t keep the grin from his face when he was with her.

“I appreciate this. Truly. But you ought to take your turn now before this water goes cold.”

“I think it’s going to take more than a wiping down to set me right.” Dany raised a hand to her mud-caked hair and grimaced.

“Relax, Your Grace,” Jon ordered playfully. He fetched one of the chairs from the table and situated it in front of the basin. “Sit.”
Dany crossed her arms doubtfully but obeyed after a moment’s consideration, taking a seat and resting her head back against the rim of the basin. Jon retrieved the cloth and started in on her face first, marveling at the contrast of the dark soot with her pale flesh that was revealed beneath. Every swipe of the rag brought her beauty back to the surface—the pink of her lips, the flush of her cheeks, and the fine smoothness of her complexion.

After a few minutes he’d cleared her face and neck of the filth, and then her hair, too. Leaning her head further over the basin, Jon gathered her matted locks and dipped them down into the water with a block of old soap, working the mud and ash loose until the strands slid through his fingers like molten silver. All the while, Dany sat still and quiet, eyeing him curiously. Finally he scrubbed her arms and shoulders, venturing as low down past her throat as he dared.

The longer Jon worked at scouring her soft skin, the more difficult it became to deny his desire to see more of her. Even the innocuous act of dabbing the cloth beneath her neck and over the swells of her chest adopted a prurient thrill, and more than once Jon thought of shoving aside the delicate cover of the burnt dress to bathe her breasts, too. It didn’t help that her breath was getting ragged, restless, or that through the scant leavings of her gown he could see her nipples stiffening at his touch. At all costs Jon avoided her eyes, knowing the slightest invitation from her would drain whatever restraint he had left. Gods, but he wanted her. Not just the softness of her lips—which just now looked especially wine-stained and decadent—but all of her. He wanted everything, to bear her down right there in the cabin and ravish her.

The unexpected reward of her kiss in the clearing had only stoked the fire of his yearning, and Jon wanted nothing more than to give Dany pleasure, to know the way her voice sounded when she lost control of it, to feel her thighs squeezing at his ears as he kissed her between them. He wanted to bury himself in the tight heat of her cunt, over and over until they both had their satisfaction a dozen times over. The image alone was enough to make his cock twitch in his breeches.

Dany raised her hand then, grasping the front of his gambeson where he stood hunched over her. Her eyes spoke of ideas as naughty as his own when Jon finally met her gaze, the pink sheen of her tongue emerging to moisten her lips. That did him in.

He let the soiled rag fall from his grip, bracing his hands on the chair on either side of her, caging her between his arms. Dany’s grip on the leather of his gambeson coaxed him in as he ducked his head down to kiss her.

Unlike the first time, there was nothing frantic or desperate in it, and the tension and unease that had held every muscle of his body taut with nerves slowly began to release at the soft brush of Dany’s lips on his. She gave a little gratified sigh against his mouth, pressing closer as she moved her arms to wrap behind his neck.

Jon was relieved to kiss her at last, tilting his face to get a better angle on the warmth of her mouth. But his stooped angle was awkward and he wanted his hands free to hold her with, so he slid them up under her legs—prompting a surprised little giggle from Dany—and picked her up from the chair.

He broke away from her lips to navigate their clumsy progress to the rug and then went to his knees on its plush surface, gently laying Dany down before him. His baser urges demanded that he fall upon her with renewed hunger, to kiss her breathless and explore the tempting curves and valleys of her body. But the sight of her lying sprawled in the glow of the fire enthralled him. Her wide, lilac eyes gazed up at him invitingly. Her lips glistened with moisture from his own mouth, darkened by wine and parted in a sultry expression. It confounded him still that a woman as beautiful as she could desire him this way.
“It’s impolite to keep a lady waiting, Jon,” she admonished with a secretive grin.

His chest was full to bursting to see her like that, an arresting tingle of pleasure crawling up his spine as he basked in her smile.

“I’m yours to command,” he said contritely, returning her grin. He came down to lie on his side facing her and Dany turned to meld against him, slipping one arm over his shoulder and using the other to prop herself up.

“Then I command you to stay here with me tonight.”

“Dany, I—,”

‘‘Have sworn vows,’’ she finished, her voice a dramatic imitation of his own. “I know. I haven’t asked you to break them. Only to stay.”

Jon stared at her, at the pleading in her eyes and the anxious rise and fall of her chest as she awaited his answer. There was an innocence and vulnerability that she was reluctant to show, but he understood it all too well. She, too, wanted to delay their parting.

He leaned forward to press his forehead to hers.

“Aye, Dany. I’ll stay with you,” he murmured.

Her hand found his cheek, fingertips running across the roughness of his stubble as she let out a shaky breath.

“Kiss me.”

Jon placed a finger under her chin, urging it up so he could reach her. The first touch of her mouth lanced through him like wildfire and he let out a guttural groan as the tip of her tongue skated along the seam of his lips. He opened them to her gladly, welcoming the velvet slick of her tongue against his.

Dany’s hands had found their way into his hair and she raked her fingers through it and anchored them there, holding him close against her lips.

She tasted sweet, like pears and wine, and Jon could feel the urgency of lust building again, his pulse pounding out a begging refrain for him to take her completely. But he didn’t. He wouldn’t, for all the same reasons that had shamed his longings and stayed his hand before.

He could never dishonor Dany; he simply loved her too much to pass their final hours together in a way she might one day come to regret. But he would stay with her like she’d asked. Even kissing her was a privilege beyond anything he’d ever expected, and he was loathe to let her go when she pulled her head back to catch her breath.

He rolled them over to lie on his back with Dany resting atop him in his arms. Her eyes were glazed when she opened them to peer at him, a lazy smile across her kiss-reddened lips.

“I’m going to miss you, Jon Snow,” she whispered, resting her chin on his chest. He swallowed at the emotion constricting his throat and raised a hand to tuck a wet strand of hair out of her face. “I’ve half a mind to command you to stay with me always and drag you across the sea to Meereen on the back of my dragon.”

Jon laughed, running a finger lightly over the curve of her cheek.
“If I were a free man, not even a dragon could keep me from your side.”

Her eyes danced at his mirth and he pulled her in to kiss her again, soft and unhurried now. His lips moved over hers languidly, savoring the wet heat of her mouth, the smell of the soap in her hair. He wanted to engrave it all in his memory so that one day when she was lost to him forever he might recall the simple joy of holding her, even if only for one night.

The fire had burned down to embers and Dany’s flaxen hair was long-dried by the time she grew weary, curling up with her head in the crook of his neck and drifting off to sleep. But Jon stayed awake into the small hours before first light, hoping for sleep that never came, and finally extricated himself without waking her.

There was only so much he could do to delay the inevitable, so he took his time preparing to leave, stepping into his boots and fastening his cloak into place over his shoulders. He set out a simple breakfast for Dany of hard cheese and rye loaf, leaving her his wineskin and another pot of melting snow on the fire for water.

With nothing left to arrange he crouched at her side and roused her with a light press of his lips to her forehead.

"What is it?" she asked groggily, blinking up at him until she registered by his cape and sword belt that he was about to leave. "Not yet," she said suddenly, sitting up.

"I must. Be ready just after sunset tonight. That’ll keep the watchers from spotting Drogon in the sky."

Dany nodded wordlessly, her expression hopeless.

“I’ll return before then,” Jon promised, making his way to the door. “To ensure you have all you need and to . . .”

"To say goodbye," Dany supplied quietly.


“Snow! You look like the dead! Had a wild night did you?” Tormund clapped Jon on the back with enough force to send him stumbling. He’d only just returned to Castle Black, and his fatigue and worry were enough without the big wildling’s jibes. He was in no mood, but he was wary of letting anyone see the extent of his exhaustion.

“Aye,” Jon answered sullenly. “If spending the night answering letters is ‘wild.’”

“Har!” Tomund boomed in response. “That’s not how I hear it.”

Jon faltered mid-step before mounting the stairs to the Lord Commander’s Tower, turning to Tormund suspiciously.

“What is it you’ve heard?”

“Threm n’ Jaritt swear they saw you out in them woods yesterday. With a dragon.”
Jon waved a hand dismissively, continuing up the steps with a nonchalant shake of his head. “Seems Threm and Jaritt have been listening to your tall talk about fucking bears and are trying their own tale-telling.”

“Maybe, Snow. Maybe. But they came tearin’ back here without a single stick o’ lumber, scared out o’ their breeches,” Tormund reported, a shade more serious.

Jon stopped on the landing, glancing back at Tormund at the foot of the stairs.

“Tell them to stop drinking before they head out to gather wood next time,” he suggested.

“Where’s the fun in that?” Tormund demanded with a ribald grin. Jon smiled faintly back at him before continuing to his chamber, wanting nothing more than a mug of ale and a couple of hours’ sleep before he saw to his postponed tasks about the castle.

But as he reached for the handle to open his chamber door he heard voices from within.

“I told you already, Ser, the Lord Commander was meant to be here. I don’t know where he is.”

Jon recognized Olly’s voice clearly even through the barrier of the door.

“I need to speak with him, boy,” a second, thickly-accented voice rejoined. “Urgently.”

With a wearied sigh Jon pulled on the latch and swung the heavy wooden door open with a squeal of its hinges. Olly stood just inside, scowling up at a harried-looking Davos Seaworth. The only welcoming sight was that of Ghost, sprawled out on the floor beside Jon’s bed behind them. The wolf lifted his head and wagged his tail at Jon’s arrival.

“Lord Commander,” Davos greeted him with a bow of his head. Olly only stared.

“A word?” the old knight asked. “If you’ve a moment.”

Jon shut his tired eyes, rubbing them with his thumb and forefinger. He expected only ill tidings from such a meeting, but he didn’t see how he had another choice considering his lack of legitimate excuse.

“Of course, Ser Davos,” he said at last, gesturing to the table. “Make yourself comfortable.”

Davos proceeded to his seat, worn boots clunking along the floorboards as he went. When he took sat down Jon glanced at Olly and nodded toward the door.

“Excuse us, Olly.” It was unlike him to remain where he wasn’t summoned and Jon was taken aback that he hadn’t left unprompted. Olly frowned at him for a moment, his freckled face scrunched up thoughtfully, as though he was considering saying something. But after a beat he turned and left with a thud of the door behind him. Wonderful, Jon thought darkly, watching him go. Evidently the boy’s petulant behavior hadn’t improved since their last encounter.

Jon joined Davos at the table and sat heavily in the chair across from the older man. Jon liked and respected him but didn’t have the sleep necessary to sit through a conversation about the merits of Stannis Baratheon today.

“What can I help you with, Ser?” he asked.

Davos cleared his throat, his eyes searching the tabletop. He looked nervous, flexing the stubby fingers of his left hand in his lap and tapping his foot.
“The Lady Melisandre returned to the castle this morning,” he began, looking up at Jon. “Just after
dawn. Alone.”

“Alone?”

“Aye. Just after your scouts came back with your wolf.”

Jon sighed, his thoughts swirling anxiously. Stannis’s siege had been a questionable move from the
start, but Jon had been too preoccupied with other worries to really consider about what might
happen if the grizzled lord lost the battle with Lord Bolton.

“What’s she told you?”

“Nothing, m’lord,” Davos replied, shaking his head. “I asked her about His Grace, about the
princess, the battle. She walked away from me. And your scouts never made it as far as Winterfell.
They had to turn back on account of the weather, but saw evidence of an attack on the Baratheon
campment.”

“The snow has been punishing,” Jon observed. “Poor conditions for marching. For fighting,
especially a siege. And in poor visibility the Boltons might have infiltrated Stannis’s camp
undetected. I expect the worst, Ser Davos. And I am sorry.”

“As am I, m’lord,” Davos muttered with a bow of his head. “But what will you do now? There’s a
chance that the queen and princess were taken prisoner. We cannot allow them to be held by the
Bolton bastard. Have you heard the things they say about him?”

“Aye, I’ve heard, Jon thought darkly. Word had spread across the North like leaves in the wind when
the Boltons took Winterfell. It was said that Roose Bolton’s vicious son, Ramsay, took their house
words very seriously, and recreated their morbid sigil with sadistic glee—flaying anyone unlucky
enough to fall into his custody.

“It’s a tragedy, Ser, and I’m sensitive to that. But I would remind you again that the Night’s Watch
does not involve itself in the affairs of the Seven Kingdoms. When my family was murdered—,”

“You family might be in danger again, Lord Commander,” Davos cut in seriously.

Jon sat up straighter in his chair. He hadn’t been expecting that.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s said that Lord Bolton legitimized his bastard boy and married him to a noble, Northern girl to
strengthen his claim to Winterfell.” The knight looked unwilling to say more, and Jon’s fists were
clenching with agitation as he waited.

“What ‘noble, Northern girl?’”

“A Lady Stark, m’lord.”

Jon shook his head vehemently. It didn’t make sense. Catelyn Stark was dead. He had no idea where
Arya or Sansa were, but last he’d heard they were wards of the Lannisters in the South, and that was
long ago. A year or more. He couldn’t believe that either of them had somehow made it home and
into the Boltons’ clutches. And yet . . .

“Which Lady Stark?” Jon wondered aloud.
“I don’t know, m’lord, but now you understand that we must intervene. The Boltons’ hold on your family’s ancient house is unlawful. If they killed my king, so be it. But perhaps we can rescue his family as well as your own.”

Jon said nothing, reaching for the tureen of wine on the table and pouring himself a generous glass. The idea of Arya or Sansa in the hands of Ramsay Snow was too horrible to even consider. If only Sam had remained for a few days more, he lamented, taking a long draught. Jon already missed his friend’s counsel and company. Just now he wasn’t sure how to proceed. It seemed like whatever action he took, he would be doing something wrong—abandoning his post, overstepping his bounds as Lord Commander, or leaving innocent women and children to die.

“These are only rumors and guesses, Ser Davos,” he decided finally. “I cannot act in this matter, especially without confirmation of our suspicions. For now, we must assume that my sisters and your friends are not being held by the Boltons, and until I know otherwise I can make no further judgment.”

Davos exhaled gruffly before nodding, disappointment written clearly across his aged face. “Lord Commander,” he said in parting, rising from the table and exiting the chamber.

When he was alone in his quarters Jon did his best not to think about the frightful possibilities Davos had laid before him, instead turning his attention to the growing stack of correspondence, reports, orders, inventories, and other documents littering his cluttered desk. He twisted around to see Ghost watching him inquisitively.

“Here,” Jon called to him. The wolf padded silently to his side and rubbed his head against Jon’s leg in greeting. “What are we going to do, boy?” he asked him with a yawn. Ghost cocked his head to the right, listening intently. Jon smiled, scratching at the thick fur between his ears.

“I could use your company today,” he said, crouching down to eye level with the big direwolf. “But I think our friend needs it more. Go and see Daenerys,” Jon commanded him carefully, looking straight into Ghost’s bloodred eyes. “At the cabin.”

Jon stood upright and moved to the door, motioning for Ghost to follow. The wolf’s snowy white ears pricked up with understanding. He took two, small steps toward his master and the door but then stopped, eyeing him with a soft whine.

“What is it?” Jon asked him curiously. “Come on.”

But Ghost only whimpered again, shuffling strangely where he stood but refusing to go. An uneasy, sinister chill settled over Jon as he looked into the wolf’s clever eyes. It was wholly out of character for Ghost to disobey him, and as a general rule Jon trusted the direwolf’s instincts. But he had no way of discovering the reason behind the wolf’s dithering and he didn’t intend to leave Dany unguarded through the day, especially not since he’d received confirmation of Threm and Jaritt’s story circulating through the castle.

“Ghost,” Jon addressed the direwolf again, with more authority this time. “Go to the cabin and guard Daenerys. Now.”

With a final, defiant huff, Ghost obeyed, walking past Jon with a slow, meandering gait, his head hung low. As he shut the door behind the wolf he couldn’t help wondering if he’d just made a mistake.
It was dark out when Jon heard the latch on his chamber door, waking him from a rest he didn’t remember taking. He sat up in his bed, squinting at the glow of a single candle that tarried in the doorway before bobbing toward him in the gloom.

The tiny flame cast just enough orange light to reveal what looked like a woman approaching from across the room. As Jon’s eyes adjusted to the darkness he could pick out her dainty, white shift, the ghostly pale skin of her throat, the long, silver hair falling over her shoulders.

_Dany_?

She sauntered over to his bed with an alluring sway of her hips, and when she got closer he could see her small, bare feet peeking out under the hem of the white gown. Above, her face was all a dancing shadow over the candle’s flame.

“Daenerys,” Jon whispered, more a statement than a question. He couldn’t understand it. How was she here? And why? He rubbed at both eyes vigorously before blinking up at her again in disbelief.

“Jon,” she returned, her voice strangely calm.


“In the usual way,” she shrugged, placing the candle on his bedside table. “Through the door.”

“Dany,” he hissed, losing his composure as trepidation nudged in at the corners of his tired mind. “I don’t know what you’re doing here, but you need to go. Or—or hide. Now!”

“Now? Why would I do that?” she questioned. “I’ve only just arrived. At least give me a chance to get comfortable.”

“Comfortable? What?”

Without further explanation, Dany tugged the loose-fitting shift off her shoulders, wiggling until it fell down entirely and gathered at her feet. Jon could only gawk in stunned silence as she stood before him, wearing nothing but a wanton smile.

She looked smooth and lean, her breasts full and round and tipped with small, pert nipples. Her torso widened lusciously at her hips, and lower there was a tuft of silver hair at the joining of her thighs. Her legs were graceful and supple, less skinny than he remembered. And all over, her skin was flawless, perfect, without even a freckle or scar to mar its loveliness.

Jon tried to swallow, to focus, but the turbulent hammering of his heartbeat drowned out any thought as his eyes gorged on her nakedness. She climbed into his bed, moving aside his fur coverings, straddling him between strong thighs. He was frozen, a statue, completely inert beneath her as she licked her lips before bending low to kiss him, her mouth claiming his greedily.

Jon didn’t—_couldn’t_—immediately respond, too shocked to move an inch. But Dany was persistent, pressing her hot lips firmly against his, running her hands over his shoulders, his chest, his belly. When her fingers dipped teasingly into the top of his trousers he gasped and pulled away from her mouth.

“What is it, Jon?” she demanded in a wounded voice. “Why aren’t you kissing me back?”

“Because I don’t understand,” he said helplessly.
“What confuses you? Do you not want me?”

“Yes, but—,”

She halted his words with two fingers to his mouth.

“And I want you. Very much,” Dany purred, her coquettish smile returning.


“Oh, yes. More than anything, Lord Commander,” she avowed with a wink. She seized Jon’s hand and pressed his fingers unceremoniously against the slick moisture between her legs. “Can’t you tell?”

He sucked in a breath and looked up at what he could see of her eyes in the dim half-light from the candle. There was only a salacious sort of need staring back at him so he slid his other hand behind her head, tangling it in the thick silk of her hair, and pulled her in roughly to assail her mouth with his.

Dany hummed delightedly at his compliance, nipping at his lower lip with her teeth as Jon glided his palm along the slippery folds of her cunt. It was almost too easy to sheath two fingers inside, and she was snug and warm around his hand and impossibly wet. He pumped into her, hard and fast until she was gasping and keening her hips against him.

“Is that how you like it?” he growled out, tearing his mouth from hers to concentrate his attentions on her neglected teats instead, sealing his lips around one pink nipple and suckling her mercilessly. Dany tossed her head back, gripping his shoulders so desperately he could feel her nails stinging through the cotton of his tunic.

“Yes,” she said, her voice almost a sob.

Jon’s cock strained in his cumbersome breeches and the desire to feel her divine tightness around him was almost overwhelming. He retracted one finger to tease his knuckle against the nub of nerves at the apex of her sex and Dany bucked wildly, letting out a long, loud cry of ecstasy that he was sure could be heard throughout the castle.

Suspended between panic and pride, Jon dragged his lips up her chest and neck to speak at her ear.

“Try and keep it down, love. Do you have any idea what would happen if we were caught?”

“Caught?” she asked in a breathy whisper. “By who? Don’t you trust your own brothers, Jon Snow?”

Jon jerked awake with so much force his left boot nearly flung free of his foot. He bolted upright in his chair, looking listlessly around his room to find it dark and quiet, Dany nowhere in sight.

A dream, he thought angrily, cursing his own stupidity. As if Dany would follow him here, pursue him to his own bed and seduce him that way. A fool’s conceit, one that even now began to slip away as consciousness returned.

It took only a few moments for Jon to register that he’d fucked up.
Night was upon them, that part of the dream, at least, had been true. He’d fallen asleep on the mountain of work at his desk and now he was late—perhaps by hours—for his meeting with Dany.

_What if she’s already gone?_

Jon was sick with dread, nearly shaking as he rose, his neck and back stiff from sleeping in his chair. His eyes darted around the room in search of his sword and cloak until a knock at his door startled him.

“Enter,” he said uneasily.

The door swung inward and Jon saw Olly at the threshold by the torchlight of the hallway. The steward inspected the murky room with narrowed eyes.

“Were you sleeping, Lord Commander?”

“Ah, yes,” Jon answered, rubbing a fidgety hand over the back of his neck. “I must have slipped off while reading.”

“Ser Alliser and the others want to speak with you in the common hall,” Olly reported, ignoring Jon’s explanation.

“To what purpose? It’s the middle of the night,” Jon pointed out, gesturing to the darkened windows.

“I suppose they didn’t want to disturb your rest.” Olly tacked a snide little smile onto his remark and Jon gritted his teeth in frustration.

“Can it not wait until the morrow?”

“There are urgent matters, m’lord. Those wildlings you assigned to Othell Yarwyck as builders are trouble. They refuse to gather wood or crush stone. They’re drunks. Barbarians.”

“You’d best watch your tongue, boy,” Jon warned, the last of his patience drying up at Olly’s presumption.

“That’s not all,” Olly pressed on boldly. “Bowen Marsh has heard strange things from their lot. Stories about you and some girl with white hair.”

“**Enough!**” Jon exclaimed. “I’ll hear no more of this. Take me to them and I’ll have an end of this gossip. Tonight.”

“As it please m’lord,” Olly assented, turning and leading the way down the stairs and toward the hall. Jon didn’t have time to bring anything with him. He hadn’t even thought to don his cape against the cold they’d pass through in the yard.

But as he and Olly emerged into the moonlight a chill that had nothing to do with the snow flurries took hold of him. Something was wrong.

Othell Yarwyck, Alliser Thorne, and Wick Wittlestick, the prison turnkey, all stood out under the cold stars, their faces solemn.

“What is this?” Jon asked, turning apprehensively to Olly.

It was Ser Alliser who replied.

“We’ve called you here to answer for your crimes, Lord Snow.”
Jon bristled at the insulting moniker. After all this time, there wasn’t a *glimmer* of respect for his station in Ser Alliser’s tone. He realized in that moment that there never would be. He also realized that he needed to leave the yard immediately.

“I’m afraid I don’t answer to you, Ser,” Jon told him coolly, endeavoring to remain calm in spite of his mounting anxiety. He could feel all their eyes on him, glowering with profound hatred.

He wheeled around, hoping he could get back to his chamber before the situation escalated. But his movement only brought him face-to-face with Bowen Marsh, who looked down at Jon with tears in his eyes. Before Jon could react, Marsh’s hand sprung from inside his cape with a flash of steel in the moonlight, plunging a dagger into his belly with jarring force.

Jon grunted softly, gaping in shock as Marsh withdrew the blade and a torrent of hot, dark blood spilled forth. The pain was all-consuming, sharp and burning, making Jon’s eyes go hazy. He wobbled on his feet, both hands grasping uselessly at the weeping wound. His fingers came away shining with red in the eerie nighttime glow of the yard, the blood steaming in the frigid air.

Shaking with fear, Jon raised his eyes to those of his First Steward. His friend. “*Why*?”

“For the Watch,” came another voice. Yarwyck this time. He edged into Jon’s field of vision from the left, shouldering Marsh out of the way. Jon tried to take a step back but Yarwyck’s knife found him anyway, shoving in between his ribs so hard it pushed Jon backward, the steel grating against bone. The old man’s grip slipped from the knife and Jon stumbled away, closing his own fingers around the handle. Even the slightest movement was agony, though, so he thought better of pulling the dagger free.

That was when Ser Alliser loomed up before him, his eyes cold and pitiless.

“For the Watch,” he mumbled, burying his blade in the center of Jon’s chest and twisting it cruelly until he cried out.

Jon fell to his knees in the snow, struggling for breaths that wouldn’t come. Terror overcame him for a heartbeat, his eyes searching wildly for help. A way out. Ghost. Something. But he saw only the hateful slant of Alliser’s mouth, Marsh’s tears of shame, a crimson puddle spreading in the snow.

*I’m going to die.*

Jon wavered on his knees, his pain fading somehow. He’d failed. Not just his brothers, but everyone. His loyalty all in vain.

He thought of Robb, riding proud at the head of an army with Grey Wind by his side, the King in the North. If Jon had fled to his aid back then, would they both be better off now?

Or Arya, practicing swordplay with her Needle and training Nymeria to hunt. If he’d followed his sisters down the Kingsroad, would they be safe today?

He heard footsteps crunching in the snow behind him but he didn’t have the strength to turn around. He coughed, tasting blood thick and coppery on his tongue.

He pictured Dany off in the woods, waiting for him at Drogon’s side in another poorly-fitted dress from Mole’s Town. He never got to say goodbye. How silly it seemed to him now that he’d been too afraid to tell her the truth before.

To tell her that he *loved* her. Now, he’d never get the chance.
I’m sorry.

Jon didn’t feel Olly’s blade when it sunk into his back, nor the boy’s breath on his neck when he leaned from behind him and said, “For the Watch.”

His only response was the gurgle of his last breath as he fell face-down in the snow at their feet.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for a sad ending T.T

Valyrian translations were something along the lines of:

"I'm glad I found you, Drogon. It's been so long."

and

"Remain here, Drogon. I'll come back for you."

Anyway, I was a little iffy about this chapter so I hope sincerely that it worked for you guys. Please drop a note if you liked it! I love you all and this fandom so much :) Thank you!
Dany

Chapter Notes

Hi, everyone! Hope you're all having a fantastic weekend so far! I'm so relieved to finally have another chapter of this story for you. I know it's been another long wait and those of you still interested in the fic are likely frustrated. BUT this update was a whopping forty-one pages long. Five times the length of some of my earlier chapters haha!

Today is my birthday, so it feels fitting that I give all of you a little gift of a longer update as thanks for all of your patience and support :)

Lastly, I want to thank my best friend Jenn/@dracarysqueen for cheering me through the process of this update, being my beta, and making my chapter banners. A huge thank you also to April/@kwonbomi, for creating the AMAZING art you'll find midway through this chapter! I love it more than I can describe :)

Happy reading, and I hope you like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

---

He isn’t coming.

Dany paced the short length of the cabin for what felt like the thousandth time that evening, beating a trail across the thick fur of the bearskin rug on the floor as she went.

Outside, a light snow had been quietly blanketeting everything in a layer of glittering whiteness all through the night. It accumulated on the windowsill and climbed up the foggy pane, no-doubt piling against the door as if to trap her inside the damnable little hut forever.

She’d been waiting on Jon for hours now. He was meant to find her at sundown, to accompany her to the woods and see her off on the passage back to Meereen. They’d agreed upon nightfall for a purpose—so that the cloak of darkness might hide Drogon’s wings in the sky.

Now those precious hours of discreet dark were waning, and Dany had long since exhausted a list of
possible excuses for Jon’s absence in her mind. He was more than merely late. The sun would be
rising soon, the first of its pinky golden morning rays peeking over the treetops, and her window of
opportunity for flying would be closed for another day.

It wasn’t that there was any special significance to this date for her departure. She had no way of
knowing the severity of the uprising in Meereen, and while she intended to return urgently, she
couldn’t see that another twelve hours without her would make any great difference.

So it wasn’t the delay that worried her so. It was Jon.

Dany couldn’t justify leaving without seeing him one last time. She’d been counting on it, after all.
When he’d set out for the castle that morning they’d expected to be together again, and their parting
had been brief, a perfunctory kiss. It wasn’t enough.

Moments like this one when she envisioned her whole future stretching before her—a future without
him—forced her to confront the depth of her feelings for the young and comely Lord Commander
Snow. Every time they separated, wherever Jon went, her heart yearned to follow. He had a hold on
her spirit like no man before him, an attachment railed against her every independent instinct. But
something told her it was reciprocal—that there was more between them than rescuer and refugee.
That something comforted Dany with the notion that Jon would never abandon her this way. Not
willingly. She believed him equally incapable of letting her go without a proper farewell.

Yet here she was, hours gone from their planned meeting, and Jon Snow nowhere to be found.
Something was very wrong.

She had nearly trampled the old bearskin rug bald when a familiar and insistent visitor came
scratching at the door.

Ghost!

Dany flew across the room to invite the direwolf inside the cabin, relief spreading palpably through
her limbs. Surely, Ghost’s visit heralded his master’s imminent arrival. But when Dany swung the
doors inward to allow Ghost through, the great wolf was all alone. He sprung through the open door
and into the cabin before turning to face Dany with an expectant look in his eyes.

“Where is he, boy?” she wondered aloud, reaching down to pat the direwolf’s head in welcome. But
Ghost shrunk back and out of reach, fidgeting all the while. Before she could try again he took to
prowling around the small room as if unable to stand still.

Sighing, she peered back out the way Ghost had come, lingering at the open threshold despite the
cold. Any moment now a silhouette would materialize in the wedge of yellow firelight thrown out
the doorway from inside. Jon would step clear of the trees, smiling softly in greeting when he saw
her waiting there. She had only to wait a little longer.

But behind her Ghost’s high-pitched whine demanded her notice, and Dany wheeled to face him
once more. The wolf’s peculiar behavior set her already fragile nerves on a knife’s edge. It was out
of character for the beast, this skittish impatience.

“What is it?” she asked pleadingly, stamping her foot in frustration. “Where is Jon?”

Snow-white ears pricked up at the sound of Jon’s name, and Ghost stepped closer, nudging at
Dany’s hand with his wet nose.

“Did he send you here?” she inquired, wishing the wolf could answer. If Jon had dispatched Ghost
to her, something must have prevented him from coming himself. Something detained him at the
castle, whether it be duty or peril. In the latter case, Dany felt bound to defend him the way he’d defended her, save his life as he’d preserved her own here in the harsh northern winter for so long. It was only fitting that she repay his generosity and bravery in kind.

But in her heart, Dany knew it wasn’t simply obligation that tethered her to Jon—his rescue and ensuing devotion to her came without cost or expectation. His help wasn’t some idle courtly favor he expected she repay. He looked after her because he was kind and good. He looked after her because he cared for her.

It was because she cared for him, too, that she gave up waiting and bustled about the cabin searching for her gloves and boots. It wasn’t duty that compelled her. As she followed an increasingly jumpy Ghost out into the dying night, hugging herself for warmth, she knew her motive was higher than honor. She was going after the man she loved.

The hike from the trapper’s cabin to Castle Black was long and arduous, made worse because Dany had no way of judging how far she had to go. It was difficult picking her way through the woods in the dark, and there was a creeping, progressive cold seeping into her bones with every step she trudged through the new-fallen powder.

The spare dress Gilly had thankfully left her was a welcome alternative to the burnt one she’d worn the day before. It was made from thick, heavy fabric not unlike the first dress, and the front was fashioned in the same, audacious cut that left it half-open with laces up the chest. Unique to this dress was its deep scarlet hue. It was fitting, Dany decided, that she wear the colors of her house as she rushed off to play the heroine, even if those colors adorned a dress more befitting a painted whore than a Targaryen queen. She could imagine Tyrion would have been quick with some ribald jest had he ever seen it himself.

The garment’s one convenience was a hood sewn onto the back that might shelter her head from the snow. But it wasn’t sufficiently warm, and the same was true of the single pair of gloves she’d unearthed from one of the crates in the cabin. They were too big for her small and slender fingers, and failed to shield them from the frost despite a coarse fur lining. To make matters worse, her boots and hem were already damp from snow. Worst of all was her face. Without anything to shield it, her skin reddened and burned from the icy breeze, her nose running as she struggled to breathe the thin, northern air.

It didn’t help her morale that Ghost was perfectly adapted to these conditions. He trotted ahead of her, light-footed and graceful, never balking even when the wind picked up and assaulted them with fresh, stinging particles of ice and snow in the air. His pawprints on the ground were as light as his delicate steps, but Dany sunk in to her ankles no matter how carefully she followed in his wake.

To pass the time she busied her mind with the possibilities of what she might find at the castle. If she concentrated hard enough she could convince herself that everything would be alright. Jon would meet her at the gates, hiding his pleasure at her arrival behind that maddeningly stoic frown. Her hood would conceal her hair and identity from his men, and she might blend in as some sickly, wildling lass allowed through the castle doors for warmth and shelter. Jon would steal her away to his chambers and explain his tardiness, complete with the consolation of a hot meal for her trouble. She’d forgive him of course, and they’d share one last, forbidden kiss in the halls of Castle Black before Jon ferried her safely back to Drogon’s cave astride his black stallion.

Dany smiled blithely to herself at the overwrought fantasy. She expected reality to be a shade less romantic, but the unlikely possibility of being welcomed through the gates into Jon’s waiting arms
was enough to keep her moving.

Up ahead Ghost slowed his already leisurely pace to allow her to fall in step beside him, his snout pointing dead ahead. The forest was thinning, their path leading to an open expanse of snowy flatland beyond the brush. Well, flat except for the Wall. If she squinted just so, Dany fancied she could make out its blue-grey bulk in the distance. With her goal nearly in sight, she pushed on with renewed vigor, so fast that Ghost broke into a long-strided lope to overtake her again.

When they emerged from the trees at last, the first fingers of morning light reached over the horizon, illuminating the staggering height of the Wall. In all her travels she had never seen anything to rival its size, and she was awed into stillness for a moment, marveling when her eyes couldn’t find the end of the mighty structure in either direction. It continued in a seemingly endless line of pale ice, silvered faintly in the pre-dawn murk. It was as imposing as it was extraordinary. Set into the great barrier was Castle Black—dark and stern—and foreboding sharpened her senses once more when she beheld its unwelcoming gates.

But her hesitation was short-lived. The cold demanded that she keep moving, and Ghost’s eagerness allowed him only the briefest pause as he halted and peered over his shoulder at Dany. His wise, crimson eyes seemed to beckon her as she lagged, and she offered him a determined nod before plodding along after him, following his path as they approached the gate.

The closer they crept to their destination the faster she moved, her resolve hardened by her desperation to locate Jon and see him safe. The unforgiving air that beleaguered her lungs before was hardly a bother to her now. Her feet were numb in her boots, fingers stiffened without feeling in her gloves, all pain and cold forgotten.

It was only when they arrived that Dany gave a thought to how they were getting inside. Ghost slowed to a halt ten feet from the great, wood and steel impediment of the gate, cleverly hanging back just far enough to be seen by the guards at their posts. Dany took a step back, craning her neck to see the top of the Wall. But the angle was too sharp, the cliff too high. On the journey from the forest she’d discerned the glow of fires along the battlements, and there were twin torches to match on either side of the gate before her. Their light wasn’t enough to reveal who or what awaited her, so she could only hope that a friendly guard held watch duty today. If the Night’s Watch was worth its name, she’d been spotted already. Now she had only to wait and see if they would permit her entry.

As she shivered in place, working out what to do next, a horn sounded out, clear and loud, its tones deep and unfamiliar. Another blast followed it, echoing in the otherwise silent morning.

Dany peered upward apprehensively, her courage stuttering. The horn might be a friendly signal—an announcement of a visitor. A wakeup call to the men.

It might also herald her doom at the hands of these strangers, Jon’s black Brothers.

She recalled the two who had pursued her through the woods, the loggers who’d abandoned their work when a more attractive option presented itself in the form of a helpless, young woman. She shivered at the memory, at her blind fear as she fled from them like a rabbit from a wolf. She hated feeling so powerless.

Beside her, Ghost was silent, though his air of nervous urgency remained. Dany had come to recognize the wolf’s moods in their time together. He’d been her most constant companion in the cabin during her tenure there and she knew him well, knew all the subtleties he used to communicate. Now, the way his ears swiveled back and forth, his unblinking stare—he was hyper-alert, focused and watchful like a predator stalking its prey. But she detected no fear in him. Perhaps the call of the horn was safe, after all.
Somewhere off beyond the gate a voice called out, but the sound was almost lost against the Wall or carried away on the breeze. Dany tried to piece the tones into words in her head until another voice answered from above. This one she could hear.

“Can’t say—just the one person. Small. But the direwolf’s with ‘em.” It was a man’s voice, young, by the sound of him. His accent reminded her of Gilly’s. A lowborn Northerner.

Dany crossed her arms tightly over her chest in the tense quiet that followed the guard’s report. She dug her unfeeling fingers into her sides, into her ribs, as though she could reach inside herself and harden her heart with the requisite strength to see this impulsive quest through.

A garbled reply came from the voice inside the castle walls, and only a moment passed before the gate quivered and shook, drawn upward to admit the visitors inside. Her heart leapt at the triumph, though even now fear beckoned like an old friend, whispering threats and warnings in her ear. But Dany was resolute. If she let them sense her uncertainty they might turn her away, or worse, confine her somewhere inside where she could neither find nor contact Jon.

The gate’s ascent was slow, its spikey bottoms dropping bits of snow as it rose clear of the ground. With every inch more of the yard beyond became visible, and by the time the gate was at the level of Dany’s chest she could sense that something was wrong. The hackles stood up along Ghost’s back and a vicious growl snarled through his teeth before he darted under the gate without her. In the blink of an eye he was out of sight in a cloud of snow powder that matched his coat.

“Ghost!” Dany called after him frantically, stooping down to chase him under the gate. Stumbling into the castle yard—her dignity be damned—she expected to find it empty. The early morning hour made most activity impractical in the deep cold and inadequate light.

What Dany found instead was a swarm of men darting about chaotically like bees loosed from a busted hive.

Her eyes flitted from one man to the next, searching for dark curls and warm, brown eyes. But there were only strangers there, each more panicked than the last. She knew very little about life in the Night’s Watch, but even a stranger could understand that whatever was happening here was out of the ordinary.

Panic prickled hot and sharp in the back of Dany’s mind as she resolved to catch up to Ghost amongst the confusion. With him she’d had an ally of sorts on this reckless errand and she was reluctant to part with him in this unfamiliar territory. But the moment she started forward her path was blocked by a harried-looking man with thinning, greasy brown hair and a short, patchy beard. He skidded clumsily into her path, his eyes wide and unfocused with fear or surprise. Or both.

“M’lady,” he began, voice unsteady. “It’s not safe for guests at the castle today. I ordered the gates open because you traveled with the wolf, but something’s happened and—”

“Yes,” she interjected, improvising quickly. “Something has happened.”

The man tilted his head to the side, nonplussed. “You know? But how? Who are you?”

Dany took a rallying breath and fixed the man with her most threatening glare. You are blood of the dragon, she reminded herself.

“Is it the practice of the Night’s Watch to interrogate women who arrive in need of help at your gates?” she demanded, stalling as she grasped for an excuse, a story, anything that might account for her presence there. “Who are you, so that I might inform your Lord Commander of this appalling
reception when you take me to him.”

“Jon . . .” the man whispered, his eyes losing focus, voice trailing off.

“Your name is Jon?”

“What? Uh, no, m’lady,” the man replied listlessly. “My name’s Edd. But you won’t be telling the Lord Commander that, as he’s, ah—.” Edd twisted around to glance over his shoulder before finishing. “Indisposed.”

Dany swallowed, soldiering past the onslaught of images Edd’s words summoned to her mind: Jon in varying states of danger and distress. The man’s manner wasn’t that of a busy person held up by an unwelcome visitor. There was something else afoot. He was afraid.

“Well, Edd, that wolf of yours. He spooked my horse,” she declared, haltingly crafting a tale of some unfortunate encounter with Ghost. “The mare threw me—as well as a shoe, I might add—before bolting and leaving me without transportation. So I—"

Edd was already frowning at her doubtfully, and the lie died on Dany’s wind-chapped lips when she heard the cry of another man’s voice. From off behind Edd someone was yelling, projecting to be heard all throughout the crowded castle yard.

"It’s the Lord Commander!"

Dany froze, Edd’s face blurring before her eyes as she stared over his shoulder at a group of men clustered around something. A group of men, and an enormous, white direwolf.

“Jon?” she asked aloud, shoving Edd roughly out of the way with both hands and running full tilt across the yard.

At her noisy approach a few of the men turned their heads curiously, and an older man with a thick, grey beard broke away from the circle to accost her. He was tall and somber, clad in a tunic of forest green. His blue eyes were kind, but they were brimming with pain when they investigated Dany’s.

“M’lady? Who - stay back—,” he tried, his voice curling around a thick accent she couldn’t place. When Dany moved to shove past him he gripped her forearm firmly.

“Do not touch me!” she snapped, shaking him off hard before shouldering through the close-knit circle of bystanders to see the spectacle for herself.

Lying on his back in the center of the circle was a man. His eyes were open and staring sightlessly at the sky, the black curls of his hair matted and frozen in messy tufts. His skin was pale white as the snow in which he lied, a stark contrast to the blue of his lips—suspended forever in an expression of surprise. His left arm was folded over his chest, hand covering one of several gashes through the leather of his gambeson, now crusted over with dried blood. The other arm was splayed out in the blood-reddened circle of snow around his torso. Ghost stood at his head, licking uselessly at the lifeless face. The macabre scene was finished with a crude wooden sign hammered into the ground nearby, the word “traitor” painted hastily on its surface in black letters.

For a long moment Dany stood blinking at him in dumbstruck horror, one gloved hand trembling where it covered her mouth. Distantly, she could sense the beginnings of a grief too terrible to bear, and a rage that would consume her like parchment in a fire. But for now she was too horrified to respond, or even to acknowledge the confused glances of the men that encircled her.
She fell to her knees in the blood-sodden snow, ignoring the responding murmurs of the old man and another behind her. She bent closer over the body, wringing her hands together in her lap to keep from touching him.

Her mind was unwilling to accept what her senses told her. It didn’t seem real. Less than a day had passed since she’d been sleeping warm and snug against his chest, now riddled with deep, malicious stab wounds. It had only been a few hours ago that she’d kissed his lips, when they were still soft and flush with color. And his eyes, his sweet, alluring brown eyes that used to crinkle at the edges when he smiled at her—eyes framed by scars she’d never learned the stories of—they’d opened for the last time, and would never behold her again.

Ghost ceased his attempts to rouse his master and came over to sit back on his haunches at Dany’s side, close enough that she could feel the plush of his fur against her.

“M’lady,” the accented voice attempted again. “I don’t know who y’are, or how you know the Lord Commander, but—,”

“You killed him,” she stated, lifting her eyes to the faces of Jon’s brothers—of the traitors who’d slain him in cold blood. “He wasn’t even armed. He wasn’t even armed because he trusted all of you. And you killed him,” she repeated, gesturing to his hip where his Valyrian steel sword was notably absent. There was discomfited grumbling and shifting in the crowd, but no one answered.

Dany turned her gaze skyward, sucking in deep, edifying breaths. Fear and sorrow had pursued her relentlessly in this life, but she’d bested them every time. Rushing to meet the future had shielded her from the horrors of the past. And whenever tragedy caught up to her again—Viserys, Drogo, Rhaego, even the fighting pits—she’d survived only by defying her pain. She was the last Targaryen, and the burden of her legacy outweighed the luxury of mourning. A hunted woman had no time for weeping with a knife at her back, and Dany knew any one of these men could end her life as easily as they’d dispensed with their own leader. But she was paralyzed by thoughts of Jon, cornered and betrayed, terrified and suffering, dying painfully at the hands of his own brothers, and dying alone.

A burning in her eyes warned of unshed tears to come but Dany blinked them furiously away. She couldn’t possibly confront the immensity of this loss, not here. Not now. If she allowed herself to dwell any more on Jon, on his goodness, on his bravery, on his death, the pain would immobilize her, weaken her beyond the point of action. Of vengeance.

“M’lady,” the man in green spoke up again, more forcefully this time. “These men here didn’t kill Jon Snow, but the ones that did will show themselves soon enough, and we’d best be somewhere else when that happens. Will you move aside now?”

Dany got to her feet, shuddering when her glove touched down for leverage in the gore of red snow. She shifted toward the man with the queer accent, studying the lines of his aged face. Ghost aligned himself faithfully at her side, showing no hint of hostility toward the man. Dany decided to trust him, for now.

The man called Edd joined them, seizing the older man by the shoulder. “Ser Davos,” he said urgently. “We need to move him. Now.”

“We can use my quarters,” Davos instructed, and Dany moved back to let them by as they were joined by two others in lifting Jon’s body. He hovered stiff as a board in their hands, not sagging heavily as a living person might, and Dany looked away, disturbed by the chilling confirmation of his lifelessness.
“Who’s she?” Edd asked, jerking his head in her direction.

Davos responded with something close to a shrug, the best he could manage with the heavy load he carried. “I thought you knew her, seeing as you let her inside the gates while we’ve got a mutiny on our hands.”

Edd’s frown deepened but he said nothing, shifting Jon’s weight in his arms.

“Well,” Davos persisted. “Can we trust her?”

“The wolf does.”

“That’s good enough for me,” Davos returned impatiently, leading the men in an awkward sidestep out of the yard.

The crowd of gawking onlookers dispersed as Davos, Edd, and their assisting brothers bore Jon’s corpse away. Dany followed behind them with Ghost in tow, her hand resting on his head as they went.

After a difficult climb up a flight of stairs and slow progress winding around a balcony corner they stopped outside what she assumed to be Davos’s chambers. The man’s eyes met hers and he nodded toward the door. “Get that for us, can you?”

After only a moment’s consideration Dany squeezed by them against the balcony railing and obliged, stepping inside ahead as they filed inside. Ghost was the last to pass the doorway before she shut them all in with an ominous thud of wood against the doorjamb.

In the quiet that followed, doubts assailed her, reminding her of the irrationality of her actions. After all the precautions Jon had taken to protect her from harm, all the loneliness and boredom she’d endured in that cabin for her own safety, it was laughable that she’d willingly thrown herself into the belly of the beast by coming here now.

Barred inside this room with men she didn’t know—men who very well might’ve killed Jon themselves, no matter what they said now—she was utterly at their mercy. Unprotected, physically inferior to their brute strength, and a woman, too. The men of the Night’s Watch were bound by vows of celibacy. What might they do for a taste of female flesh behind closed doors?

Yet Dany’s own self-preservation was of little consequence as she beheld Jon’s mutilated corpse. The shock was still too fresh, scrambling her thoughts and setting her on uneven footing so she could never quite get her bearings.

Edd and the others worked together to support Davos’s load as he freed his hands to clear off the table at the center of the room. Without preamble he used both arms to sweep an assortment of parchment, writing implements, goblets, and bowls away, all of which landed loudly and messily on the floor.

With the newly-available space ready the men lowered Jon to the table with care, Edd most of all. The others stepped back once Jon’s body had been arranged securely, but Edd hovered by his Lord Commander’s side, and after a moment’s silent deliberation he lifted a hand to press Jon’s eyes closed.

Dany kept her place by the door all the while, concentrating on holding her despair at bay. Planning her revenge seemed as good a distraction as any, and a singular goal dominated her thoughts: find those responsible for Jon’s death. Ghost’s trust inclined her to believe that the men in the room had indeed been loyal, so her suspicions didn’t extend their way. Not for now.
But it seemed that she was still a subject of confusion to them. They were antsy in the presence of a stranger at a time like this, though none of them vocalized their concerns. For several tense minutes the men set to building a fire and relieving Jon’s body of the outer layers of his armor.

It was only when they’d run out of menial tasks to complete that Davos spoke up. “I’ll ask again,” he sighed, turning to Dany. “Who are you?”

Her fists clenched with a creak of her gloves, and though her face was a studied mask of passivity it hid her irritation underneath. Now wasn’t the time to waste on introductions. Jon was dead, and someone had to answer for that atrocity. But these men wouldn’t proceed in Dany’s presence if she refused to cooperate. She had to give them something.

“My name . . . is Dany,” she announced begrudgingly, trusting that the nickname wouldn’t be enough to hint at her true identity yet, not with her appearance obscured beneath the hood. She thought it best to choose a familiar name, one she would readily answer to if they addressed her.

“Dany what?” Davos prodded, impatience flashing in his eyes. “Are you with the Red Priestess? Your . . . your gown. Are you another of her kind?”

“Priestess?” Dany asked, fumbling. She had planned to invent a story, of course, to lie to them. But Davos’s direct question possibly offered a ready-made explanation for her identity and presence at the castle. Davos couldn’t tell whether that explanation would work in her favor. The formerly kind, albeit exhausted Davos bristled with anger at the idea. Perhaps he didn’t care much for priestesses, especially priestesses in dark, red gowns. Looking down at her offending dress, Dany was stricken with an idea.

“No,” she corrected him finally. “I’m only a commoner. A whore.”

Davos tilted his head thoughtfully to the side, eyeing her up and down.

“And how does a whore come to friendship with a direwolf and the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch?”

Her eyes followed Davos’s to Jon’s face then, the ghostly pale flesh, the eerily still lips. She shuddered.

“Jon rescued me,” she answered, almost a whisper. “I underestimated a group of violent . . . clients. They hurt me, but he intervened. He took me away from the danger and looked after me until I was well again.” Dany didn’t miss the dubious glances exchanged between the men.

“Looked after you where?” Davos asked. “The Lord Commander lives here at Castle Black, and this seems to be your first visit inside its walls.”

“He don’t visit the brothels neither,” Edd added, scowling at Dany as if she sullied Jon’s memory with the mere suggestion.

“Oh, no. No, it wasn’t like that,” she clarified quickly, a swell of emotion threatening her speech at the real memory of her first meeting with Jon. She’d been difficult and distrusting, angry and stubborn; but Jon’s patience and gentleness had never wavered. “I’d tried to run away. After I was hurt. He found me in the forest. I think Ghost may have led him to me.”

Davos was nodding thoughtfully. He believed her. She could feel it. “And then?”

“And then he and his friends, Gilly and Samwell, they tended my wounds. They kept me hidden from my attackers in an abandoned cabin in the woods. Gilly, she lived in a brothel. She remembers
how awful they can be. She didn’t want me to have to return there, and neither did Jon.”

The taller of the two brothers in the corner spoke up then, an edge of gallows humor in his voice. “That why he was gone all the time, then? Why Thorne and the rest was so suspicious of him? They took him for a traitor, and all the time our brave Lord Commander was off giving his Longclaw to some Winter Town whore.”

“I told you,” Dany snapped, face going hot with anger. “It wasn’t like that. Jon never—he wouldn’t—”

“M’lady,” Davos interrupted. “Help us understand. If the two of you weren’t . . . involved, then why? Why would the Lord Commander spend his time looking after—begging your pardon—a ‘commoner and a whore?’ And why not just bring you here to be looked after like the girl you mentioned? Like Gilly.”

She opened her mouth to answer but couldn’t quite, not with a mouth so dry, eyes burning with moisture. She joined Davos at the tableside, stepping into the soft light from the candle-laden chandelier hanging above. She removed her gloves, stowing them in the pocket of her gown, and reached down to take one of Jon’s hands in her own. It was stiff, and colder than she’d imagined possible. But she held it still. She wished for the power to will breath back into his lungs, life back into his eyes. They’d been close to saving him, after all. If only she’d come a little earlier she might have stopped this, disturbed the yard before the mutineers could go about their bloody purpose.

“You want to know why Jon Snow would spend his days caring for a stranger in the woods?” she murmured, stroking her thumb over the back of his hand. “It’s because he was good. He was good, and brave, and kind. He only ever wanted to help. And he didn’t bring me here because he suspected I’d be in danger, an injured whore in the company of libidinous men. Now that I’ve seen the violence and cowardice of his ‘brothers,’ I understand why he kept me away.”

The others nodded in silent agreement, and Edd returned to gazing despondently upon Jon’s face. There was peace in the little room as they all sought refuge in their own thoughts, the only sounds their breaths and the crackle of the fire behind them. So when Edd suddenly punched the surface of the table once, hard, everyone jumped in alarm. “Alliser Thorne did this,” he spat.

“Aye, expected as much,” Davos offered gravely, bracing his hands on the table in front of him. “How many men can you trust?”

Edd scoffed bitterly. “Now? The men in this room.”

Davos assessed the two others standing off to the side. When he looked to Dany, Ghost shifted, stepping closer to her.

“We’ve got the direwolf,” Edd commented with a shrug. “That’s something.”

“And just what to do you plan to do with ‘the direwolf?”’ Dany inquired, running a hand down Ghost’s back in a protective gesture echoing the wolf’s own.

“Fight our way out of here. Avenge the Lord Commander, if we can.”

“It won’t be enough,” Davos argued. “Thorne will’ve announced himself Lord Commander now. He’ll order them all to take us. To refuse will be treason for you sworn brothers.”

“Fuck that,” Edd returned. “He’s no lord, and he sure don’t command me. The treason is his. And you’re right—we don’t got the numbers. But I knew when I came in here that the only way out was through those men. I don’t need to get out alive, so long as Thorne don’t neither.”
A rush of pride and admiration surged through Dany at his words. She hadn’t expected such bravery from the unassuming man, never mind that he was a little reckless. She was ready to fling herself into battle behind him, if only she knew how to fight.

“Don’t be so hasty with your lives,” Davos scolded. “The lot of us dying today won’t bring Jon back, and it certainly won’t honor his death.”

“So what?” Edd challenged. “We do nothing? Wait for them to sniff us out and kill us? Even if we all manage slip away, we won’t last long headed South without food or horses.”

“No, of course not.”

“So you have a plan?”

“The beginnings of one,” Davos admitted, stroking his short beard as he pondered something carefully. “After all,” he went on, looking at each of them in turn. “You aren’t the only ones who owe your lives to Jon Snow.”

“The wildlings,” Edd realized, nodding to himself.

“Aye,” Davos confirmed. “Will they listen to you? Force their way inside and take Thorne and his men down?”

“I believe they’ll try,” Edd replied hesitantly. “For Jon, they will.”

“Then go,” Davos urged him. “Go before they wise up to us and surround the place. We’ll be counting on you.”

“But how do we get ‘em through the gate?” Edd wondered aloud. “That’s been the wildlings’ trouble all along, hadn’t it?”

“I don’t know, but it’s the only chance we’ve got for now.”

“And you, m’lady,” Edd gestured to Dany and then the door. “You’d best come, too. This may be your last chance to get out safely.”

Dany shook her head. “I thank you for your concern, but I will not leave him. He didn’t leave me, and I intend to see justice done.”

“A fool’s honor,” Davos observed good-naturedly. “I can see why the Lord Commander liked you.”

After Edd had stolen away, the men went about undressing and cleaning Jon’s body. A compulsion to assist them nagged in the back of Dany’s mind like an itch she couldn’t quite reach. With Jon she’d shared a closeness of the sort she’d rarely, if ever, known before. They’d trusted and protected one another, and she’d felt neither shame nor fear at his touch. It seemed only right that she be the one to lovingly bathe his body, to cleanse his wounds and comb his hair. He deserved the respect of these last rites. Yet their intimacy had never extended past a certain point; Dany had never seen his naked body.

Modesty and embarrassment were foreign concepts to her after her time among the Dothraki, but it was different for Jon. It would violate his privacy, his consent, for her to look upon him for the first and last time now, in death. It was wrong.
So while the men went quietly about their work, Dany warmed her hands and toes at the fire, resisting the urge to monitor their labors behind her. The hours crawled by at a rankling pace. The hush within the walls of the chamber and the uncertainty of what would happen next were encroaching at the borders of her composure. She felt even more a prisoner than she had out in the isolation of the cabin, so it was almost a relief when an unexpected rapping sounded at the door.

Dany sprung to her feet, pivoting to face the entryway with a mixture of hope and terror. Surely it was too soon for Edd’s return?

A deep, authoritative voice boomed at them through the barrier, confirming her fears.

“Ser Davos,” greeted the would-be intruder. “We have no cause to fight. We’re both anointed knights.”

Dany’s eyes flitted to Davos briefly. A knight?

Davos grinned darkly. “Hear that, lads? Nothing to fear.”

“I promise safety for all brothers who lay down their arms before morning, though I would implore you to come out, peacefully, now,” the voice pressed, ignoring the older man’s sarcasm.

“And what of those of us who aren’t your brothers, Ser Alliser?”

Ser Alliser? Thorne? Dany’s eyes narrowed to slits of rage, her jaw clenching hard enough to hurt. She marched to the door to try and snag a view of the murderous traitor through the crack in the door, to no avail.

“You’re free to go. Wherever you wish. We’ll even give you a horse to take South,” Thorne assured Davos, his clipped voice a clue that his patience was wearing thin.

“I’d like some of Hobb’s mutton, too,” Davos added merrily.

“Excuse me?”

“Mutton stew. A specialty of Hobb’s. My favorite. I won’t make it far on the road with no food, of course.”

Thorne sighed at the old knight’s mocking. “Whatever you need. Take the Red Woman with you if you’d like. Or leave her behind. It makes no difference, only surrender now.”

The Red Woman? Dany glanced ruefully again at her own scarlet gown, fearing it was she the man referred to. But Davos caught her eye and shook his head as if to answer her question.

“Thank you, Ser Alliser,” he replied tersely. “We’ll discuss this amongst ourselves and be back with you shortly.”

She sensed the man hesitating on the other side of the great wooden door before he thought the better of replying, and gathering his retinue of mutineers, he retreated.

When the patter and thump of the men’s footsteps had faded out of earshot, Davos shrugged at them all, looking helpless.

“I’ve known men like Thorne before,” he informed them, drawing a battered steel sword from a scabbard at his hip. “If we wait here until he returns and open our doors to him—”

“He’ll slaughter us all where we stand,” Dany finished.
“Yes.” Davos held the blade up in the firelight, studying his warped reflection in its metallic sheen. “It’s up to Edd to get here in time.”

“It’s a sorry fuckin’ state of affairs when Dolorous Edd is our only hope.” Dany glared at the taller of the two brothers leaning casually against the far wall.

“At least Edd had the courage to leave and seek help,” she countered.

“Maybe. Or maybe he saw an opportunity to save his own skin and took it.”

“No matter what happens outside those doors tonight, we’ve got our own skins to save now,” Davos announced.

With difficulty, Dany fixed her gaze on Jon again. His brothers had stripped him down to his smallclothes, and the white ruin of his torso was exposed. Hard lines of muscle stood out beneath ghastly pale flesh. His chest and arms looked sculpted of marble, a hardy strength she’d never gotten the chance to see him wield. The Jon she’d known was sweet and mild But she saw now the formidable man he had been, cut down in his prime. The evidence of that was gruesome to behold—thick, deep, ragged lacerations scattered about his chest and belly. Though the men had wiped him clean of dried blood, the wounds still looked wet and fresh, a dark purple in the faint light.

It had been one thing to know Jon had died, to see his unmoving corpse, the blank expression in his once soulful eyes. But the wounds themselves told the bloody tale in more detail. He’d suffered, horribly. His death had been a long and painful one.

If I’d convinced him to leave with me, we’d be far away from here, Dany thought dismally, regret a bitter bile on her tongue. What if I’d never come at all? If I’d never met Jon Snow, he might be alive today. She remembered the crude comment his brother had made, about Jon’s absence from the castle and his suspicious movements. Stealing away to be with her so often brought him under the scrutiny of his enemies. Saving her life might very well have doomed his own.

The unfairness of it all was enough to break her, if she’d let it. What measure of agony was hers to digest? A tender, weakling portion of her soul cried out the names of everyone she’d lost, beckoned her to a hopeless anguish she might never climb out of.

So Dany turned away. If I look back, I am lost, she reminded herself, breath hitching on a sniffle.

She was too late to save Jon, too late to help him. But she could bring fire and blood to the cowards who’d taken him from her. She could avenge him. She must.

“From the way you all talk, Edd won’t be able to get the wildlings through the gate by force. They’ll have to be let in,” she reasoned. “We’ll have to overwhelm Thorne’s men from the inside, take them by surprise.”

“And how do you propose we do that?” Davos asked skeptically. “With just the four of us there isn’t any way. Hells, Thorne’s probably got a man posted at the door already. Even if he doesn’t, the yard’s wide open. We’ll be spotted getting to the gate no matter what we do.”

“Perhaps,” Dany allowed, folding her hands calmly before her. The yard is wide open, she mused, a plan already formulating in her mind. “As you say, Ser, we cannot tarry here and await Thorne’s return. If we do, our only exit from this room will be impassable.”

“So what are you proposing?”

“Send me. I’ll have the gates opened, bring the Free Folk inside the castle walls, and deliver Thorne
and his men into your custody.”

All three men scoffed in varying degrees of disbelief, Davos the most perturbed by her wild suggestion.

“Forgive me, Dany, for a lack of faith. But I don’t see how just one person—never mind just one, small woman—can hope to overwhelm an armed and armored guard detail. You’d be marching to your own death, and I can’t see that honoring the Lord Commander’s memory or his wishes.” He paused, eyeing her with solemn scrutiny. “If he cared for you as much as I can see you care for him, he’d stop you before you throw your life away.”

Dany smiled faintly. “He would try, Ser Davos. And like him, you wouldn’t be the first man to underestimate a woman’s strength—even a small one like me.”

The old man didn’t have a ready reply for that, and Dany took his silence for acquiescence. “Stay here until the time is right,” she cautioned them all.

“But how will we know when ‘the time is right’?” Davos inquired.

“You’ll know,” she said simply. “Thank you. For what you’ve done for Jon,” she added in parting, gesturing for Ghost to follow as she made her way to the door. She paused after unlatching it, turning to survey the room again. The image of Jon’s still form on the table was all she needed to shore up her courage as she stepped out into the dark corridor.

There was no guard outside as they’d suspected. Dany took it as a good omen as she followed Ghost’s lead through the quiet of the castle, retracing the steps she’d taken earlier that day.

Night had come—and almost gone away again—while they’d been sequestered in Davos’s room, covering the castle in a veil of darkness that made its already foreign passageways take on a sinister quality; but Dany was oddly calm. She had a strategy in place. She had Ghost at her side. And whatever might happen next, the certainty that she was doing the right thing lent her bravery. The unchecked violence of Thorne and his allies had to be stopped. The truth of what happened to Jon couldn’t die with his friends at the hands of his own subordinates. He deserved more than that.

It wasn’t until she and Ghost rounded a corner and came within view of the yard below that they even saw another soul—a guard, standing at the railing of a stretch of balcony. He jumped at their unexpected entrance, drawing a shortsword, its blade glinting in a sliver of fading moonlight.

“Who goes there?” he demanded, breath misting in the chill air.

“Where is Alliser Thorne?” Dany asked, ignoring the guard’s question.

“Beg pardon? Who are you, m’lady? Where’d you come from? I—”

“I asked you a question,” Dany cut him off sharply. The cold out on the balcony was bracing, enlivening her senses. “Where is Alliser Thorne?”

“He’s still holding a meetin’ in the Shieldhall. B-but I don’t believe you’re permitted on the castle grou—”

“Bring him here,” Dany commanded, taking a bold step toward the man. He brandished his sword in answer, and Ghost leapt forward, snarling viciously.
“You would move to strike a defenseless lady?” Dany tutted. “I thought the brave men of the Night’s Watch had more mettle. It seems you’re as craven as Thorne.”

“Craven?” Bold words for one hiding behind the protection of Lord Snow’s rabid beast.”

It was Thorne’s voice, smooth and mocking, and Dany turned toward the sound to find a group of men emerging into the yard below. At the head of the crowd was a tall man with dark, curling hair, greying at the edges. His eyes were beady and cruel, his lips twisted in a derisive sneer.

“Are you here to answer for your crimes?” Dany questioned, eyes boring into the man as she made her way to the staircase nearby.

“Crimes?” He echoed with a chuckle, looking her up and down with lascivious glee as she descended the stairs to meet him. “Are you one of Stannis Baratheon’s red ladies? Women aren’t meant to live on the Wall. That was another mistake of Lord Snow’s. Soon to be rectified, I assure you.”

A spike of red-hot rage lanced through her at the man’s arrogance, his complete lack of remorse about Jon’s murder. The idea that a spineless coward like this had ended the life of a man of Jon’s caliber went beyond injustice. Nothing would be more satisfying than to unleash Ghost upon Thorne, to watch the wolf rip out his throat so that he’d never poison Jon’s name with his spiteful tongue again.

But that wasn’t part of the plan. Fierce as he was, Ghost wasn’t enough to intimidate the growing throng of men filing outside into the snowy yard. Dany had expected as much. So she didn’t signal the direwolf, even as he padded back and forth before her, growling in open aggression.

Dany focused her own fury, channeling it with her thoughts, reaching out with all her will, calling .

“Bold words,” she challenged Thorne, “for one hiding behind the protection of a pack of traitors.”

His eyes glinted at that. She’d struck a nerve. Good .

“What do you know of traitors, girl? You’d do well to close your mouth before you say something you regret.”

Dany tilted her head thoughtfully to one side. “That almost sounded like a threat, Thorne. But surely it wasn’t. I’m not one of your unfortunate brothers, and it is not in your power to harm or detain me. It’s you who ought to close your recreant mouth.”

“Oh, I don’t know about all that. What do you think, lads? Looks like a wildling to me, and we all know what to do with wildlings who attack Castle Black.” The crowd of men guffawed at Thorne’s words, but Dany could see the chinks in his confidence even as he advanced toward her menacingly. “As far as we’re all concerned, you’re a mad wildling bitch, didn’t know how good she had it after Snow let her South of the Wall. Thought she’d try and lead an uprising with her savage wildling friends and paid the price for it. You think the King’s Justice is concerned with the fate of one, stupid wildling, girl?”

“There is no king in Westeros,” Dany replied icily, matching Thorne’s steps until they were toe-to-toe. “But as queen I assure you I’m very concerned by your idea of justice.”

Thorne peered at her face then, really studied her, noticing her eyes for the first time, the glint of silver hair peaking out at the border of her hood. He swallowed, taking a barely perceptible step back.
A sound cleaved the silence before he could respond, a loud, peculiar, *inhuman* screech. Dany’s heart stirred, satisfaction swelling through her as she watched the color drain from Thorne’s face. The screech was followed by a great *whoosh*, and then another. The men gathered in the yard looked about apprehensively, a low murmur filling the square as they wondered at the strange noise. They’d all heard the rumors from the wildling camps, of course: a *dragon* in the woods. But that was impossible.

The whooshing grew nearer, a second, piercing screech ripping through air. Men were covering their ears to drown out the sound. Others craned their necks, gawking at the sky for the source of the noise. For a moment there was nothing, and Thorne looked about to collect himself again. But then Drogon appeared, speeding silently into view with wings outstretched in a glide. His great, black mass hurtled over them like a storm cloud, a mountainous silhouette against the pale grey sky.

Dany stood facing Thorne, her expression betraying nothing of the soaring triumph she felt at her dragon’s arrival. For his part, the man was making a noble effort to mask his terror as he looked from the massive beast overhead back down to Dany. Behind him, several men scurried for a space under the cover of a balcony or landing. Those with stouter hearts held their ground, pointing and exclaiming at the marvelous sight.

Ghost eyed Dany for cues and she patted him comfortingly on the head before gesturing him out of the way of Drogon’s landing. The dragon’s leathern wings snapped in the wind as he descended at Dany’s back, pushing a forceful gust that whipped the hood from her head and loosed her hair to blow around her face. Thorne’s eyes teared from the rush of cold air, but he allowed himself only one, hesitant step backward as Drogon touched down with an earth-shaking boom. Collected snow shook free and fell from eaves, roofs, and balcony railings at the force of the dragon’s weight.

Dany clasped her hands calmly before her, without a flinch or even a glance over her shoulder. Drogon’s breath was hot on her back. She could hear the snorts with every exhale and detect the faint scent of smoke that followed him everywhere. But even beyond her usual senses there was an awareness of her dragon, a connection. That connection had summoned him to her side now, just as she’d planned. It was thrilling, this newfound control, this communion with Drogon’s power.

Thorne made no move to retreat, though his fear was evident. His left eye twitched erratically, his mouth hung slack. He was trembling. To his men it probably looked like courage: Alliser Thorne, brave enough to hold his ground against a dragon. In truth he was simply scared stiff, petrified. He was every bit the pathetic coward Dany had imagined when envisioning the traitor who’d murdered Jon.

Wordlessly, she turned her back on him and approached Drogon with a grateful grin. The dragon bowed his head at her in greeting, his scales glistening in the growing light.

“Kirimvose,” she whispered as he lowered his wing to the ground to assist her climb. It wasn’t the graceful mount-up she might have hoped for; her dress lacked the freedom of movement that came with her tailor-made gowns, and Drogon had grown since last she’d ridden him. But she had strength enough to pull herself up by the spikes along his spine, and she settled in comfortably on his back as she’d done in the fighting pits before.

From the height of Drogon’s back Dany had a better vantage point to see that the men in the square had grown in number. Most of them had backed away as far as the crowd would permit, faces drawn in varying expressions of fear and awe. From all sides the clamoring of sound signaled the approach of more spectators, no-doubt roused by the dragon’s noisy entrance. Dany hoped Davos was among them.

It was a miracle Drogon been able to land without destroying anything, his size nearly too great for
the boundaries of the castle yard to contain. That meant there was little she could do without
destroying or at the very least damaging the structure in the process, and that was something she
wouldn’t allow. Whatever some of these men had done to Jon, the Night’s Watch must be spared.
Many of its members were good men, and brave. This castle was their home and Dany had no
intention of taking it away from them.

But they didn’t know that, and it was this fear that Dany relied on now. The shock of Drogon’s
arrival, of seeing a dragon in the flesh, it had to be enough to drive Thorne’s surrender and that of his
men. And if not their surrender, then perhaps they would be sold out by those in their ranks still loyal
to Jon.

“Men of the Night’s Watch,” she called. “Yours is an ancient and honorable order, and one I respect.
To those among you who honor the vows of your calling, those who respected the leadership of your
Lord Commander, I mean you no harm. But there are traitors among you, men who slayed your
leader in cold blood. Jon Snow was unarmed and unsuspecting when he was ambushed and
murdered by several of his sworn brothers.”

A susurrus of voices rose as the men absorbed the announcement. It was no surprise to most of them,
she knew, but there were some who cried out in disbelief or anger, and it wasn’t long before all eyes
came to rest on the still-motionless form of Alliser Thorne.

“And it is to those traitors that I speak now,” Dany continued. “Surrender. Come forward and
surrender to the justice of your brothers. I am not here to play judge, jury, or executioner, but justice
will be done, and since Alliser Thorne has seen fit to usurp the role of your commander in a violent
mutiny I will enforce that justice until order is restored in this castle.”

“Order?” A wan, young man stepped forward from the crowd, his face densely-freckled. But for all
the youthful innocence of his features, his expression was dripping with scorn. “What do you know
of order? Who are you to come here ‘n tell us what’s right? Maybe the men who killed the Lord
Commander was doing that to restore order.”

“You’re the Targaryen princess,” Thorne blurted suddenly, interrupting the boy’s diatribe.
“Daenerys Targaryen. You’re Daenerys Targaryen.”

“I am,” she confirmed. “I am Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen, the rightful Queen of the
Seven Kingdoms, and as it is your duty to protect those kingdoms I will see the return of peace and
stability here.”

“I was loyal to your father,” Thorne interjected urgently. “To your family. During Robert’s Rebellion
I was loyal ;”

Dany levelled him with her coolest glare. “Loyal?” she repeated coldly. “You led others in a
mutiny that culminated in the slaughter of your lord and you speak of loyalty ?”

“Aye, I killed Jon Snow,” Thorne fired back, prompting a series of gasps and curses from the men.
“So did Bowen Marsh, and Othell Yarwick, and Wick Wittlestick.”

Dany shifted restlessly in her seat at his words, thighs tightening against Drogon’s rough hide. The
brazen admission stoked her rage like fresh wood on a fire, and Thorne was utterly vulnerable—the
only person standing apart from the crowd in the open, under the dragon’s maw. To burn him would
be easy. It would be justice. But she refrained, if only for Jon. Jon would have given the man a trial.
He wouldn’t have cowed to his emotions, and neither would she.

“But we did only what was necessary to protect the Watch,” Thorne went on. “I’ve served here for
longer than you’ve been alive. I’ve given my life to the Night’s Watch, and he was going to destroy it. He let *wildlings* through our gates as no other Lord Commander has ever done before. He—"

"Thorne has confessed to the crime," Dany announced. "And named his accomplices. Ser Davos?"

"Yes, m’la—ah, Your Grace." Davos’s reply sounded from her right, and Dany turned to see the old man watching from the second story landing. As she’d suspected, the clamor had drawn him and the others out of their chambers.

"Open these gates to Edd and the Free Folk," she ordered. "They’ll aid you in securing the castle until these men are tried and—"

"*No!*" the freckled boy bellowed, and Dany glanced down to find him with a bow in hand, arrow nocked and drawn, aimed directly her way. "You won’t let ‘em in. They’re the ones you should be worried about. The killers. Jon knew it, and he didn’t care. He deserved what he got for bringing ‘em here. I helped, and I’d do it again."

Dany lifted her chin, eyes blazing at her would-be assailant. A low growl radiated through Drogon’s frame as he sensed her ire. He expelled a breath with a loud snort, smoke billowing from his nostrils. The boy did not lower his weapon, though his arm shook where it held the bow out before him.

"Olly, *no!*" a voice from the crowd shouted frantically. A tall, grim-faced, man pushed his way free from the group and ran to Olly’s side. Drogon’s gaze followed the movement away from Thorne and toward the boy and his companion.

"Are you mad? Put it down!" the man insisted, reaching for Olly’s bow. But the boy stepped stubbornly aside.

"No," Olly refused, shutting one eye to focus his aim and drawing the string back tauter.

A sudden shock of fear and dread shot through Dany at the sight. The memory of the Harpy’s arrow sunk deep into her flesh came crashing back with an immediacy that made the wound in her thigh throb with remembered agony. "No," she whispered, as Olly let the arrow fly.

It was over in an instant, the arrow whizzed past her near enough to rustle the hair dangling by her right ear before sticking in a wooden post on the balcony behind. But before Dany had the time to breathe a sigh of relief Drogon opened his mouth and rained fire down over her attacker and his companion, smothering both in a deluge of flame.

"Drogon, *keligon!*" Dany ordered, her command nearly drowned by the roar of the blaze, the mortified shouts of the crowd. It was too late. Drogon desisted at once but the heat and intensity of his fire had already done its worst—both Olly and the other had been reduced to a smoking heap of ash.

The sun had finally shown itself through little breaks in the day’s cloud cover, shining a sluggish light over the scene. Nobody moved, and only the smoke and motes of black dust dancing in the light indicated the violence of moments before. Dany’s hands shook where they gripped the spikes at Drogon’s neck. She was unsure of how to proceed now, the situation having escalated beyond her comprehension. Everyone else seemed equally flummoxed, never having witnessed a dragon’s wrath.

The tension was broken when a figure clad all in a red glided from the shadowy corner of the yard into view. It was a woman, Dany realized, with long, wild red hair to match the deep crimson of her dress. Her sloppy appearance was at odds with the finery of the fabric of the gown and the
expensive-looking gold choker that clung to her neck like a jealous lover. But she was tired and unwashed, her clothes disheveled, hair unbrushed, dark crescents marring the ivory flesh under her eyes. They were unnerving eyes, the blue of the sea at night, and just as impenetrable. Now they were probing at Dany, picking her apart, and beneath that gaze Dany was spread bare. The longer the woman gazed, the wider she smiled, and while it must have been a trick of the light, the ruby set into her shining gold choker seemed to glow brighter by the second.

“Dragons are fire made flesh,” the Red Woman remarked, her voice rich and resonant. “They are the embodiment of R’hlloor’s power in the mortal world. And you, Mother of Dragons,” the woman continued. “Command that power.”

Dany opened her mouth but words failed her. Everything about the woman repulsed and frightened her. Something in her demeanor seemed oddly familiar and sinister, and Dany was reminded of the strange inhabitants of Qarth she’d encountered so many years ago—Quaithe the Shadowbinder, the warlocks—and the priests in Meereen.

Ser Davos cleared his throat, ignoring the woman’s intrusion entirely. “Open the gates, lads,” he called, and after a short hesitation the guards complied.

The gate rose with a creak of protest, and soon revealed Edd standing at the head of a large group of wildlings. To his right was a towering man with a bushy orange beard and sharpened, old battle axe. Even from her seat atop Drogon’s back across the yard she could see the rage in the man’s blue eyes.

The wildlings funneled through the gateway and into the castle, led by the axe-wielding man. He marched straight toward Thorne with the confidence of a king, but halted mid-step when he noted Dany astride Drogon.

“I’ll be buggered,” he murmured, shaking his head in disbelief. “Threm wasn’t full o’ pig shit after all. It really is a fookin’ dragon!” Chuckles sounded here and there among the wildlings.

The man turned back to Thorne, who sighed, shoulders slumped, and briefly considered the pile of ash in the snow nearby. “I surrender,” he proclaimed at last.

With the help of the Free Folk, Davos and Edd made quick work of arresting Thorne and the others, depositing them in the ice cells for later punishment. After the incident with the boy called Olly, Dany was all-too-eager to send Drogon away to his temporary home in the forest cave.

“Jikagon arlī, Drogon,” she instructed after a clumsy dismount and an affectionate pat on his snout. He’d obeyed, albeit reluctantly, and with a few thunderous flaps of his wings he was airborne and away. The crowd amassed outside watched him go with no shortage of amazement.

When he’d gone, their focus shifted to Dany—some studying her with admiration, others with fear. Davos’s invitation back to his chamber was a welcome diversion, and he led the way through the densely-packed square. The men parted readily to grant them passage, though their eyes followed her closely. The big wildling from before, who’d introduced himself enthusiastically as Tormund, joined them along with Edd and Ghost.

Dany hadn’t expected anything to have changed in her absence, but the reality of Jon’s body still inert on the table as they’d left him was jarring all the same. She kept expecting him to sit up and open his eyes, gracing her with one of his elusive smiles.

She wondered what he would have made of the episode in the yard, of Olly’s attack and Drogon’s
lethal retaliation. The Jon she knew likely would have accosted the boy before Drogon had the chance. The thought of his protectiveness only made her miss him all the more.

Edd tended the fire while Davos began pacing the length of the room, hands clasped behind his back.

“So you’re really Daenerys Targaryen,” Davos marveled. “What in Seven Hells are you doing here?”

Dany sighed, shrugging. “My story before was mostly true. I was attacked in Meereen. I escaped with Drogon. He brought me to the forest nearby where Jon found me. I was meant to return to Essos but when Jon didn’t make it out to see me off I knew something had to be wrong.”

Davod nodded somberly, but Tormund continued staring at her in wonder.

“‘Drogon.’ That your dragon?”

“Yes.”

“Magnificent beast,” he observed appreciatively.

“Thank you,” Dany returned with a small smile. “Though I worry I should never have summoned him here today.”

Edd scoffed, standing up from the fire and stretching his aching joints with a wince. “You hadn’t done that, we’d never have made it inside.”

“Yes,” Dany allowed, nodding. “But that boy, Olly, and the other. They’re dead. I never intended —”

“The boy tried to kill you,” Davos insisted. “And his loyalty was to Thorne. He betrayed Jon.”

“And the other?” Dany pressed. “The man?”

“Wittlestick,” Edd supplied helpfully. “Another traitor, that one. You saved us a noose.”

She wanted to believe them, to trust that she’d been right to bring Drogon to Castle Black. But in her mind she could only see the shepherd who’d approached her in Meereen, his child’s charred bones in his arms, the two wildlings who’d pursued her in the woods and nearly paid for it with their lives.

Dany’s ancestors had maintained only tenuous control over their dragons. Binding spells and special horns were utilized to bend the will of the most terrifying beasts the world had ever known. Yet Dany had commanded Drogon with only her voice, had reached him with only her mind. He wasn’t the wild, unfettered monster many feared he might become. He was her child, her protector, an extension of herself. Her control over him had limits that she couldn’t ignore, but it seemed he only pushed those limits when her safety was in question. In theory this was a good thing; but taking lives for any reason was abhorrent, and the lives Drogon took were hers to reconcile.

“What will you do now? Er, Your Grace,” Davos asked, tacking on the title as an afterthought.

Though titles were the last of her concerns now, she warmed to the old knight’s instinctive trust in her claim, his ready loyalty. Davos Seaworth was a good man.

“I don’t know, truthfully,” she admitted. “I’d like to stay for the trial, if I may. I’ll need to send word to my people as well, to let them know that I’m alive.”
“Aye, we can send a raven,” Edd offered, falling into a chair. He looked utterly spent, his exhaustion reflecting Dany’s own. Her weariness was starting to fog at her brain, but none of them could afford the respite of sleep yet.

“And Jon. I’d like to be here when you honor Jon. When you . . . bury him.”


Dany shuddered. The mere thought of Jon succumbing to such evil cooled her blood. Evidently Gilly’s and Jon’s tales of the horrors beyond the Wall were well-known, but something in Tormund’s statement brought Davos’s restless movements to a stop.

“That’s something,” the old knight mused.

A gentle tapping at the door punctuated his remark.

“Ser Davos,” greeted the visitor from the other side.

“Melisandre,” Edd whispered, frowning.

“Let her in,” Davos urged.

Tormund was nearest, so he unbarred the door and opened it to the woman. She appeared just as Dany remembered her from the yard, but in the firelight the dark pools of her eyes burned a terrible red. The priestess ignored Tormund, sweeping past him with a whisper of her skirts and hurrying to Jon’s side. Her hand reached out to his cheek with graceful fingers, her mouth pulling into a grimace.

“I saw him in the flames,” she said. “Fighting at Winterfell. After Stannis . . .” she trailed off, and Davos shook his head at her with uncharacteristic contempt.

“I thought he was . . . I thought the Lord guided me here to find Jon Snow.” She paused, eyes coming to rest on Dany again. “But now my true purpose has been revealed. I was mistaken before.”

Dany resisted the urge to shrink away from the woman’s gaze. The implication of the words disquieted her.

“Maybe you don’t have to be. Mistaken, I mean,” Davos suggested.

Melisandre narrowed her eyes. “I don’t understand.”

“As Tormund was saying before you arrived, the dead have a hard time staying dead here. Can your Lord bring Jon Snow back to us?”

“I . . . have met one with this power,” she reported, turning away from Jon’s place on the table. “But it should not have been possible.”

“So it is possible, then?” Davos pressed, coming around to stand beside her.

“Not for me.”

“Why not?”

“The Lord has turned his back on me,” she whispered, her prior confidence deflating. Dany inched closer to listen.

Davos’s eyes closed and he raised a hand to rub them tiredly. When he spoke again his voice was
charged with urgency. “I’ve seen you do impossible things before. Terrible things, but impressive. Please, you must try.”

Melisandre directed her penetrating stare toward Dany again. “What do you make of this, Mother of Dragons?”

Dany blanched, stricken with anxiety. She hadn’t shared this title in the woman’s presence, and no one had addressed her as such. Just as before, out in the yard, Melisandre looked not at her but into her. Experience had taught Dany that magic carried a price, that its practitioners weren’t to be trusted. Yet the Red Woman didn’t appear to be veiled beneath artifice now. Her expression was one of unguarded distress. And while the thought burdened Dany with territorial resentment, it seemed the priestess was deeply invested in Jon. If there was a chance she could do something, they ought not to pass it by for caution. With Jon already dead, what was there left to lose?

“I believe that we should explore all options if there’s even a small likelihood of helping Jon,” Dany replied finally, her poise betraying none of her inner turmoil.

Tormund grunted doubtfully, crossing his arms over his chest and shaking his head. Edd looked ambivalent, though he failed to voice any dissenting thoughts on the matter. And Ghost had fallen to melancholy, lying on the floor at Jon’s side. Davos counted all their silence for consent.

“So it’s settled,” he proclaimed. “What’ll you need?”

Preparations for Melisandre’s ritual were minimal. She required only a knife and a roaring fire, and as Davos, Edd, and Tormund huddled around the table to watch, Dany resigned herself to the corner of the room.

The scene disconcerted her, the ritual clearly some sort of blood magic reminiscent of a similar act long ago, one that went horribly wrong and altered Dany’s life forever. The more she pondered the memory, the less confident she felt about supporting this action. A protest was waiting on her lips, but remained unspoken as Melisandre commenced with her task.

She took the knife in hand, a fine blade she’d borrowed off a grudging Tormund, and Dany flinched when the priestess touched the polished metal to Jon’s face. But instead of his skin, she cut at the ends of his beard, a lock of his hair, before tossing both into the flames behind her. The fire flared in response, glowing ethereally brighter for a fleeting beat, a prelude to Melisandre’s incantation.

“She says,” she chanted, the Valyrian tongue instantly recognizable to Dany’s ear. She could tell by their vacant expressions that the men in the room understood none of it. “Zyhys oñoso jehikagon Aeksiot epi, se gis hen syndorro jemagon,” she chanted, the lines translated to, “We ask the Lord to shine his light, and lead a soul out of darkness. We beg the Lord to share his fire, and light a candle that has gone out. From darkness, light. From ashes, fire. From death, life.”

The words sounded legitimate enough, though truthfully Dany was ignorant of magical practice. In the Common Tongue, the lines translated to, “We ask the Lord to shine his light, and lead a soul out of darkness. We beg the Lord to share his fire, and light a candle that has gone out. From darkness, light. From ashes, fire. From death, life.”

Life. Could any person really wield power to reverse life and death? Dany’s stomach twisted and soured with nerves, and when Melisandre finished speaking the room’s other inhabitants looked similarly pale in the face, breaths held in anticipation. In defiance of her doubts, Dany took comfort in all their common goal. She was in the company of Jon’s friends, people unified by the desire to
save him, though she wished for the fellowship of someone she knew —like Gilly, always ready with a cheerful word.

But no amount of hope could raise the dead, and after a breadth of soundless tension in the wake of Melisandre’s spell, Jon’s form remained still and cold. The priestess cleared her throat, shaking her head once quickly as if to clear it before reciting the last stanza a second time with emphasis.

Like her first recitation this one had no effect, and even a few steps removed from the table Dany caught her desperate whisper in the common tongue. “Please.” She repeated the line a third time, like a refrain, her voice sharp with agitation.

No sooner had she uttered the last syllable than Tormund gave up. He scoffed disdainfully before collecting his knife from the table and stalking out the room without a word. Dany imagined that he was embarrassed, a wildling warrior like him tempted by South-of-the-Wall superstitions. But whatever faith he’d put in Melisandre, he’d done it for Jon. Like the rest of them, he only wanted his friend back.

Tormund’s abrupt departure was followed by Edd soon after, crippling the last of Melisandre’s confidence. She did not make a fourth attempt to rouse Jon. Her eyes found Davos’s and Dany watched them hold the other’s gaze with a charged antagonism that she didn’t comprehend. This one failure didn’t explain the look of open hatred on the old knight’s face as he beheld the Red Woman. He awkwardly patted Jon’s lifeless shoulder before shuffling sullenly out the door after the others.

Melisandre turned to Dany last, her face desolate.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered.

And then Dany was alone.

There was an abandoned wineskin by the door, Davos’s by the look of it, and she picked up it and took a long drink. It was a good wine, and strong, burning all the way down her throat.

A quick search of the room revealed Jon’s clothes in a neat pile beneath the table, and she stooped to remove his heavy cloak from the top of the heap. Even with the fire and the close confines of the chamber she craved its warmth and weight on her back. Wrapping it around herself, she found a seat in a chair by the fire, snuggling down into the fur and fabric for comfort. The scent of Jon engulfed her, submerging her in memories. It hurt deeply to think of him; but memories were all she had left of him now, and Dany clung to every one like a raft in the sea.

Without anyone to mark her weakness, she let her tears flow, silent streams down her cheeks, salty on her lips. She couldn’t say with any certainty how long she sat in the hard, wooden chair, crying herself dry. There were no windows in Davos’s little chamber, and time had a queer way of contorting her perception in her misery. She’d felt defeated before, but never quite like this. Jon’s loss was different than the others she’d weathered.

Viserys had never shown her love or compassion. From her brother she’d expected cruelty before kindness, and though he’d been the last of her kin, his death had carried a tentative relief. No more fear of waking the dragon. Without his physical punishment and consistent barrage of insults she’d become the dragon herself. Outside his shadow, she’d grown in the sun.

And then there was Drogo. She’d cared for him, of course. Her Sun and Stars. The fearsome brute she’d married had gradually developed a softness she’d appreciated, but their intimacy was more duty than pleasure, their bond borne of necessity, not affection.
Jon was the first man to truly earn her love. He’d found her at her lowest, dirty and starving like a common vagrant, beaten to the brink of death. He’d rescued her in every way a person could be rescued.

After two decades of pain, betrayal, loss, and suffering, a love as unconditional as that of Jon Snow was the rarest of all treasures. And to know his tenderness, to feel his passion, only to lose it forever was beyond the gamut of her endurance.

Melisandre had spoken of some god, his will and power, as if there were any reason and order to the travesties of the world. Dany could find no logic in the death of a man like Jon. She certainly didn’t believe it was part of a grand design.

Yet some intervention of fate must have brought her to the Wall, into Jon’s path. Even in this, her darkest hour, she felt a measure of gratitude for that happenstance.

Maybe life was a transaction of sorts—woe and hardship exchanged for moments of happiness and contentment. If she were to balance her experiences, love and loss, pain and pleasure, she might still count herself lucky—even now, afflicted with a pain so keen it was like a widening hole was being carved out in her heart, ragged and festering at the edges. Dany would gladly bear a thousand days of such sorrow for the one night she’d passed in Jon’s arms.

Ghost rose from his spot beneath Jon’s body and came over to where she reclined facing the fire. He spread himself out over her cold feet, and together they lapsed into a troubled rest.

A frantic, gasping inhalation of breath shattered the silence like a crystal chalice against a stone floor, and Dany woke with a jolt, scrambling to her feet so hastily that she trod on Ghost’s tail.

The wolf’s snort of annoyance and pain went unnoticed, though, all her attention riveted to the table where Jon’s body folded forward at the hips and sat up straight, chest heaving with large gusts of panicked breath.

Dany screamed, stumbling backward and nearly toppling into the fireplace behind her, now burned down to glowing embers. She blinked her sore eyes in disbelief, rubbing the sleep from them before daring another look.

Jon was as he’d been when she awoke: sitting upright on the table. He was breathing, moving, alive. Dany swayed dangerously on her feet, the room swimming in her vision. Her own breathing felt shallow and inadequate, quickfire breaths that left her hungry for oxygen, for relief. She brought a shaking hand to her chest in alarm. The frenzied thump of her heartbeat confirmed the panic obscuring her senses.

She squeezed her eyes shut again, dropping her arms stiff by her sides as she focused on quieting the riot in her heart. It wasn’t real. It couldn’t be real. It was a trick, a cruel, evil jape at the hands of Melisandre. She should never have trusted the witch, this marking the second time that Dany had fallen to the temptation of dark magics in her grief.

Even with her eyes closed, she could hear the phantom breaths, the clicking of Ghost’s claws on the floor as he trotted excitedly to the tableside. It was convincing, this apparition, like the visions that had dazzled and frightened her in the House of the Undying years before. Yet certain as sunrise, Dany knew that the image of the man she loved, alive again, would vanish the moment she looked upon him once more.
When she chanced to open her eyes, Jon remained there still. He was facing her now, watching her with a stunned confusion to rival her own. Confusion, and something else, too—fear.

“It’s alright,” Dany murmured reflexively, crossing the room to his side. Disoriented, Jon flinched and cowered at her approach, nearly tumbling from the surface of the table when she drew near. She persisted, ignoring the fresh tears that threatened to spill at the sight of him so frightened and vulnerable. Dany unclasped his cloak from her own back and arranged it over his bare, quaking shoulders.

“You’re alright,” she repeated softly, trying to convince herself as well as Jon. “I’m here.” And he’s here, she thought, overwhelmed with a conflicting combination of gratitude and disbelief. It just couldn’t be.

If this was hard for her, she couldn’t fathom what Jon was thinking, how he must be feeling, so she determinedly swallowed the lump of emotion from her throat and dabbed the wetness from her eyes with the back of her hand.

His gasps quieted some at her soothing, though his body still shook with violent shivers. Dany stooped over to hug him close, desperate to warm him, comfort him any way she could.

He stiffened at her touch but soon relaxed, settling in her embrace with his face pressed into her bosom. Dany exhaled a relieved sigh over the top of his head, stroking shaky fingers through the familiar, dark curls.

His hair was the same—the soft, springy texture she’d felt before when they’d kissed out in the woods and again in the cabin by the fireplace. When she dropped her face to press a kiss to his head, she smelled the same, manly scent she’d come to associate with him—sweat and leather and common, unperfumed soap. Only his looks were altered—paler, gaunter, and marred by fresh scars. Dany tried not to think about those.

His breath was moist where it tickled at her skin, his arms around her waist keeping her close. It was growing harder and harder to deny that this was real, that he was here. He was back. It contradicted everything she thought she knew about life and death, love and loss. Yet Jon Snow was in her arms again, and with a sneaking, gradual progress, Dany accepted what she saw and smelled and felt. Melisandre had done it. She’d brought Jon back from death.

He mumbled something inaudible, his voice muffled at her breast. Dany disentangled herself carefully from his arms as he looked up to find her eyes.

His own were haunted, dark, their usual rich brown overcome by an unyielding blackness.

“Dany?” he asked hesitantly. His voice was raspy and thick, but still the voice she knew. She nodded at him encouragingly squeezing his hands in hers.

“The last thing I remember was Olly . . . I died.” He paused, looking down at himself, at the hideous gashes across his chest and torso, wincing in disgust at the sight. “I can’t be here I-I don’t . . . How?”

“I hardly know,” she whispered. “The Lady Melisandre. She did something, and it worked. You came back.”

She sniffled, shaking her head at him. “Why do you think?”

Jon held her gaze for a heated moment before averting his eyes, and Dany wondered if he could feel the depth of her love in that look. Of course she’d come looking for him. There had never been a choice—she simply couldn’t face the thought of leaving him that way, of spending the rest of her life wondering why he’d never made it to meet her.

Jon’s eyes darted about the room with mounting panic, his breath picking up again. “Where are they?” he demanded suddenly, swinging his legs over the side of the table and standing haphazardly. His grip on her hands tightened as he steadied himself, his eyes boring searchingly into hers.

“Who?” she asked, bewildered.

“Thorne and the others,” Jon hissed. “Where are they? Did they hurt you?!” His hands slid up to her shoulders and he shook her as he spoke, teetering precariously on his feet.

“No,” Dany swore. “They didn’t hurt me. They’re . . . not a threat to us now.”

His eyes softened slightly at her words, loosening his grasp. He scrubbed a hand over his face with an exasperated sigh.

“What does that mean?”

“It means they can’t hurt you anymore,” Dany answered gently, deciding to save the tale of Olly’s and Wittlestick’s demise for a more appropriate moment. She reached for Davos’s wineskin, coaxing Jon to take a fortifying gulp. He coughed when the first drops hit his tongue but then drank gratefully, taking several swallows before setting it aside.

“They killed me, Dany,” he told her, voice breaking. “My own men. They—”

“I know,” she broke in, taking his face in her hands. “I know. They’ll pay, I swear it.”

“Aye,” Jon agreed bitterly. “They’ll pay. But it’s not only that. I-I failed. I tried to lead them. I tried to help them. And they murdered me for it.”

Dany’s heart shattered at the naked suffering in his voice. He’d been betrayed, cruelly and ruthlessly, and he was blaming himself. Jon deserved better than this place, than its people. He had a pure heart and a sharp mind but because of his bastard birth he’d sentenced himself to a criminal’s life, languishing away at the edge of the world. His sacrifice had been met with the hatred and treachery of those closest to him.

“Why am I back?” he asked finally. “Why?”

“I can’t explain how it happened,” Dany said again. “But you’re here because you deserve to be. Maybe that’s all that matters.”

Jon took a shaky breath. “I don’t understand any of this.”

“Neither do I,” she admitted. “But I don’t care. You’re here with me, and I’m thankful for whatever brought you.” Jon didn’t reply, he only looked into her eyes, his hand tucking an errant lock of hair behind her ear. His palm lingered to rest against her cheek.

It was a simple gesture, but she was stricken still by the miracle of it. Ten minutes past, Jon was dead. He was dead, and the last vestiges of her hope had died with him. Now, he lived again—standing before her bearing the proof of his own murder on his skin like ink on a parchment.
The birth of Dany’s dragons had opened her eyes, shown her that the world played host to wonders beyond her wildest dreams. But death was different, the one and only finality and absolute. She wasn’t prepared for this. To see the most ironclad of all the world’s laws broken before her very eyes was frightening, humbling.

She raised her hands to grab at the collar of his cloak, eager for contact, to confirm that he was actually there, that he was real. She fisted the thick, dark fur in her fingers so tight her knuckles went white, as though that grip was the only thing anchoring Jon to the earth. She could feel the hot tears rolling down her cheeks again but wiping them away meant releasing her hold on him and she wasn’t sure she’d ever be ready to let him go again.

His wide, dark eyes watched her with that same fondness she’d seen there dozens of times before, and it was stronger now, holding her hostage so she couldn’t look away. But sadness underlied his every move, Jon was hurting despite his efforts to recover his composure, and it made her heartsick to think of his pain, an affliction she wanted to remedy. Her need to comfort him was overwhelming. She wanted to crawl inside him and collect all his pain, bear it out herself so he could breathe again.

But it wasn’t in her power to heal his wounds, emotional or otherwise. Her embrace would have to be enough. It was all she had to give. The thought made her feel helpless.

Jon searched her face, absorbing the devotion etched plainly into her features like words in a book. “I’m the one who’s thankful,” he murmured. “For you.”

His thumb smudged at a tear on her cheek, the curve of his palm tilting her chin toward him. His face dipped in closer, stopping just before their lips met. The heat of his breath caressed her parted lips, his eyes boring into hers with a desperate appeal. Perhaps he needed it as much as she did—some physical testament of his return, proof of his vitality.

Dany was more than willing to appease him. The barest nudge of her chin eliminated the distance between them and she kissed him softly, almost chastely at first. Her fingers knotted in the fastening of his cloak, holding him fast against her. Jon’s eyes fell closed with a groan as he kissed her back, his hesitance giving way almost instantly.

Peril and pain seemed only to harden Jon’s touch. His lips clung to hers possessively, his hands traversing a path from her jaw down her neck, her ribcage, her waist. His strength caged her in place before him but she was a willing prisoner, welcoming the probing strokes of his tongue into her mouth. She could taste her tears on him—hot and salty—a sharp reminder of the tragedy that almost was.

Every beat of his pulse and hiss of his breath was a marvel. He’d been lost to her entirely. Gone. But here he was invading all her senses, fingers curling roughly into the flesh of her arse, lips warm and pliant over hers. His skin, so pale and cold before, was flushed and hot against her own, undeniably alive.
Dany had never cherished him more, could feel her love pouring out in every tear, with every breath. She was brimming with love for him, her heart overflowing with it. The words tingled on the tip of her tongue even as it tangled with Jon’s in his mouth. But she couldn’t speak, could barely even stand. She was shaking in his arms, overcome by the intensity of her emotions.

Jon pulled away then, their lips parting on a shared breath. His hands dropped from her as he took a step back. At the sight of her tear-stained cheeks his expression sobered, remembering himself suddenly.

“I’m sorry. I don’t . . .” he trailed off, his eyes avoiding her.

“It’s my fault,” Dany protested quickly. “You need time to accept what’s happened.”

“Aye, I need time,” Jon agreed sullenly. He took one of her hands in a gesture of reassurance, offering her the beginnings of a smile. “But not away from you. Never away from you.”

Her heart fluttered at his words, the affectionate sincerity in his eyes. She returned the pressure on his hand.

Their conversation was cut short when an intruding voice exclaimed from the doorway.

“Maiden’s tits! I don’t believe it!” Dany’s head whipped around to face the familiar voice. Davos was frozen, silhouetted in the open doorway, his jaw hanging ajar.

Ghost, who’d been lying forgotten by the fire, stood to greet their visitor, his lips curling around a warning snarl when Davos was joined by another.

Melisandre trailed just behind him. She assessed the scene briefly, mouthing a shocked exclamation.
under her breath that Dany couldn’t make out.

Davos and the Red Woman had scarcely allowed Jon the time to dress before barraging him with questions. How was he killed? What happened after? But Jon was short-spoken with them both, sullenly insisting that there was “nothing” after the moment of death. His answer unsettled them, Melisandre most of all.

They weren’t given much time to ponder the complexities of the afterlife, though, with Davos wasting no time ushering Jon out of the room and onto the balcony overlooking the men in the yard below. An assortment of wildlings and sworn brothers were gathered there, all blinking upward with a mixture of reverence and dumbfounded disbelief.

Dany stood close at Jon’s right, tension from their interrupted moment humming between them like a swarm of fireflies. She could sense his nervousness, too, his reluctance to face his men in the wake of the mutiny. His hand reached out for hers almost instinctively, lacing their fingers together.

“The men think you’re some kinda god,” Tormund observed from Jon’s left after greeting his friend with an ecstatic welcome.

“I’m no god,” Jon huffed.

“I know that,” the big man boomed, elbowing Jon roughly in the ribs. “I’ve seen your pecker. No god’s got a pecker that small!”

Dany pressed her lips together to suppress her amusement, a snort escaping her nose as she turned sympathetically to Jon. But he only grinned weakly at his friend’s jibe.

“I’ll let you be the one to break the news, then.”


Jon sighed in answer. He turned to lead the way down the stairs toward the common hall, his hand never dropping Dany’s.

Davos and Edd followed, the latter watching Jon thoughtfully. “What’ll you do now?”

“Deal with the traitors.”

“Thorne, Bowen Marsh, and Othell Yarwick are secured in ice cells, m’lord,” Davos reported.

Jon nodded, then stopped short.

“What of Olly?” he demanded, wheeling on Davos and Edd. “And Wittlestick?”

Davos’s eyes homed in on Dany beside Jon, and he nodded silently in her direction.

“I’m sorry,” she offered nervously. “I didn’t intend - but Drogon—”

“Drogon?” Jon asked, incredulous. “At Castle Black?”

Panic burned through her mind like hot needles pricking at the back of her skull. She didn’t want to overstep Jon’s authority here, to terrorize his men with her dragon and leave him with the aftermath. She’d meant only to liberate his loyal brothers, to avenge his death. She’d never thought that anyone
would be fool enough to try their luck against Drogon’s power.

“M’lord, she saved us all when her dragon came,” Edd interjected, mercifully sparing Dany an explanation. “If it weren’t for that, we’d’ve been cornered with Alliser’s men upon us. She was brave. Olly didn’t have the sense to stand down with a dragon in his face. He made to shoot her off the beast’s back, and Wittlestick tried to stop him too late. The dragon only acted to defend her.”

Jon turned to Dany slowly, his expression unreadable.

“You fought for me. You exposed yourself, even Drogon. For me.”

Dany nodded, barely trusting herself to speak for the way her throat constricted. “I did only what honor required, Jon. But I did it for you.”

“Aye, and you almost got killed for me,” he pointed out, anger coloring his tone. “What good would it have done if you’d died right along with me?”

“I didn’t die,” Dany argued.

“Without her, the Red Woman might never’ve gotten a chance to bring you back,” Tormund added reasonably.

“Yes, but I never intended the boy to be burned,” Dany added, eyes falling to her feet. “I regret that.”

“I don’t,” Jon said seriously. “Had he harmed you, he would’ve faced a crueler end at my sword.”

“And what end have you in store for the others?” Davos inquired as they continued their progress through the castle, every man they passed stopping to watch Jon and Dany like a royal procession.

“They’ll hang,” Jon announced, when at last they came to the common hall. He stopped and released her hand, turning to face the men, his expression solemn. It was a just sentence, but the difficulty of passing judgment on his own brothers was evident all over his face, in the dispirited slump of his shoulders.

“Let it be til the morrow,” Davos suggested, gesturing to the slowly-filling hall. “You could do with some rest.”

“It isn’t rest I crave, Ser,” Jon replied. “It’s justice.”

A swell of pride expanded in Dany’s chest to see his authority, his leadership and assertiveness. She recognized her own passion in his perseverance. But she could only side with Davos in this matter. Her concern for Jon won out over her own thirst for vengeance on his enemies. Just for one night, he had to relax.

“Hobb’s preparing a feast in your honor,” Edd chimed in hopefully, and Dany could see the conflict in Jon’s eyes. He was nearly convinced.

“Justice can wait a day,” she urged, laying a hand on his shoulder.

“Aye,” he agreed after a moment. “We’ll see to the traitors tomorrow.”

Hobb’s feast was as grand an affair as could be at a place like the Wall. There were great, steaming platters of roasted mutton and venison, thick onion gravy and piping hot boiled potatoes with salt.
There was freshly baked, dark brown bread with fruit to finish the meal, and tureens of honey to sweeten the rolls.

A roaring fire warmed the room, crackling and spitting its glow over everyone gathered. All evidence of mutiny and murder was gone, and it seemed unthinkable that only hours before, Castle Black hosted the darkest of grief and heartbreak.

At each of the long tables spread throughout the hall, the men of the Night’s Watch ate with zeal, toasting the triumphant return of their Lord Commander. Jon had invited many of the Free Folk, too, and Dany could pick them out easily among the diners—spots of grey and white among the black.

The Watch honored her with a place at Jon’s side, and the finest and freshest dishes were served to her first. Tempting as the meal was, her appetite eluded her. Despite her efforts to relax and enjoy the feast Dany’s stomach was in knots, her mind wandering to the uncertain future.

Before the feast Jon had departed to his tower to rest, and Dany had ventured to the rookery to compose a letter to Tyrion. In the past she’d been wary of a raven being intercepted, giving up her location when she was vulnerable and in hiding. Now that she’d revealed herself publicly to the men, there was little sense in secrecy. She needed to tell her friends that she was alive, and hopefully obtain some word on their own wellbeing.

There was some finality in the sending of the letter, a confirmation that she was alive. That she would return. The thought made her oddly squeamish.

She was running out of reasons to postpone her journey home, and every passing hour felt like one step closer to her parting from Jon. Leaving him would be hard enough, but concern for his safety now added to her dread. Instead of eating, Dany sat regarding him thoughtfully as she mulled over her inner conflict in silence.

Jon had barely touched his own food and was glowering out at the men around the hall. He’d cleaned up for the evening’s feast, looking well in a bastian shirt of black roughspun and close-fitting leather breeches to match. His boots were polished, his sword hung stately at his hip. His dark hair was clean and shining in the firelight, secured with a band at his neck in a way Dany had never seen him wear it before. He was beautiful.

But the longer she watched him the more apparent his discomfort became. Instead of joining the others in their celebration of his life, Jon was obviously still shaken by the reality of his death. He fidgeted all through the meal, sulking and sighing, hardly acknowledging the numerous toasts to his health. Not even Tormund’s series of bawdy jokes broke through his melancholy.

The only thing that seemed to interest him was her. Every now and again she would look up to find him staring at her, his eyes on her wine-stained lips, the gleam of her silver-gold hair, the creamy curves of her cleavage in the ridiculous red dress. Each time she caught him he’d look away, chagrined, taking a drink of his ale to distract himself. The potent drink clearly had his blood up. The thought made Dany sweat.

“Jon,” she intoned finally, angling in her chair toward him. “Your food is going cold. You really ought to try it, you know. Your cook has outdone himself this evening.”

He rested his chin on his fist, not bothering to look up at her suggestion, though his eyes swiveled her way. The candlelight revived their color, a rich golden brown. “I’m not hungry,” he muttered.

“Yet you haven’t eaten,” she pointed out, leaning in closer. “Are you well?”
He neglected to answer at first, turning his attention back to the filled hall. “Aye, well enough.”

Dany frowned. Perhaps this feast was unwise after all. Jon had never been especially loquacious before but he was detached to the point of coldness tonight. Her palms sweated where they sat folded in her lap as she squelched the impulse to reach out to him. Evidently he wasn’t interested in her—or any—conversation.

She sighed, spearing a sliver of venison on her fork, when Jon stood up suddenly, raising his hands to silence the men in the hall.

“Thank you, brothers, for sharing this meal with me. Your company is an honor,” he began, to a great hooting and banging of cups on tabletops in agreement. “But I’m taking an early leave to rest for the evening.”

There was some shuffling and murmuring of confusion amongst the men at his announcement. The evening had only just begun. There were still those at the rear of the hall who’d yet to be served their supper, and Dany suspected that many among the diners had been counting on a speech from their Lord Commander before the night was through.

“Has the King’s Tower been arranged for Her Grace’s use this evening?” Jon asked, turning to Edd in the seat to his left.

“Wha’?” Edd asked around a mouthful of roasted potato. He swallowed hurriedly, his eyes watering from the effort. “Yes, m’lord. It’s been seen to.”

“Good. I’ll be in my quarters.”

There was a befuddled turning of heads and shrugging at the high table, but the men assented, and Jon departed with a bow of his head and a polite “Your Grace” to Dany. His chair scraped loudly as he moved it clear of his path, exiting the hall at a brisk clip.

Dany watched his retreating figure, dropping her forgotten fork to her plate with a clang. She was stung by his brusque exit, even if the circumstances excused it. More troublesome, though, was the thought of him alone with his thoughts in his empty tower. Jon had set Ghost free to hunt for the night and she knew that he would be confining himself to an evening of total solitude in his chamber.

To her right Davos was equally introspective, contemplating his goblet of mulled wine. Next to Jon’s now-empty chair Edd had returned to tucking into his meal and chatting amiably with Tormund. Thus occupied, she hoped they might allow her own departure without much remark. It was Jon who was the guest of honor—not her—and after their long day they’d surely reason that she’d earned a rest.

She rose from her seat, curtseying when Edd glanced her way. “Good evening,” she offered politely. “And thank you for preparing me a room.”

“Of course, Your Grace.” Edd scrambled to his feet as if to show her the way but she shook her head and held up a hand to stop him.

“There’s no need. Finish your meal.”

He smiled gratefully and resumed his seat as Dany slipped away with a nod at Davos, making haste toward the door before anyone else could detain her.

In the corridor without, she paused to get her bearings. The only knowledge she possessed of Castle Black was what little she’d gleaned in her brief stay within its walls. She knew the general direction
of the Lord Commander’s Tower but would have to overtake Jon before he got too far, lest she lose herself in the many rooms and winding hallways.

She set off, breaking into a jog for good measure, bearing left when she came to a branch in the path. The dark added to the difficulty in finding her way, the corridors only faintly lit from the torches ensconced at intervals along the walls. Coming upon a staircase, Dany took it for a good sign; she’d need to go up to get to a tower, after all. She gathered her skirts in her hands to keep her footing on the steep and narrow steps, minding her feet as she ascended. With her eyes to the floor she couldn’t see the figure watching her from the landing, so it was only when she looked up at the last step that she noticed Jon standing there.

Yelping in surprise, she took a step back, her heel teetering over the edge of the stair. It was only Jon’s quick reflexes that kept her from toppling backward down the steps, his hands shooting out to grasp her by the wrists. He yanked her toward him with enough force that their bodies collided, chest-to-chest, the momentum pushing them both a clumsy step back.

Dany peered up at him, at his eyes, inscrutable in the dark. Her pulse was sprinting with adrenaline from her near-fall, breaths coming in short hiccups of air.

“You alright?” he asked looking her up and down, worry carving lines across his forehead.

She nodded, watching his eyes drop to her lips, still parted around a gasp of surprise. Warmth radiated from him, the place where she could feel his heartbeat against hers, his palms still encasing her delicate wrists.

“What are you doing here?”

Dany blinked up at him, feeling suddenly brash. She’d followed him with the intention of comforting him, but now that she’d found him—or rather, stumbled across him—she couldn’t think of a thing to say.

Jon let go of her arms, granting her the freedom to put a more comfortable distance between them. She didn’t move.

Neither did he.

“You left the feast so abruptly,” she explained, lifting a shoulder in a shrug. “I worried for you.”

His face softened. “You seem to have adopted the habit of coming to my rescue, Your Grace.”

“I learned from the best, Lord Commander,” she returned, flushing at his teasing.

“Lord Commander,” Jon repeated, the title chasing the humor from his eyes. “I lack the wealth or good name of a lord. The respect and loyalty of a commander. What does that make me?”

Dany frowned, touching his shoulder lightly.

“A good man,” she supplied seriously.

“There are men in the ice cells who would disagree with that assessment.” He sighed, turning back to his path and beckoning her along before she could argue.

They walked side-by-side for the remaining hike to his chamber, close enough to brush shoulders, for Jon’s knuckles to skate across the back of her hand every now and again. His presence and nearness relieved her, but his own black mood was more evident with every step they took. Dany
glanced up, hoping to get a read on his emotions. But his expression was grim, and whatever his thoughts, he kept them to himself.

They passed two pairs of guards along their route, both saluting Jon and calling out greetings and goodnight wishes, eyeing Dany curiously. Jon ignored them all.

His stony silence was beginning to nag at her by the time they mounted the last staircase to the Lord Commander’s Tower, and she was grateful for the excuse to stop when he announced that his chamber was just ahead. A tightening ache in her bad thigh protested with every step she climbed, until finally they came to a great, sturdy wooden door. Jon opened it without preamble and stepped inside first, holding it ajar to let Dany through before latching it shut behind them. He barred the lock for good measure, and then they were alone.

“It isn’t exactly royal accommodations,” Jon said, scrubbing a hand self-consciously over the back of his neck as she looked around the room.

“I’ve lived quite happily in a dothraki tent,” Dany reminded him gently. “This is fine.” But surveying the chamber, she was stricken by how very cold it felt—varying shades of grey and brown, devoid of any color or ornament. Like everything else she’d observed in the Watch, it was made with practicality, not comfort, in mind. Jon’s years of solitude spent at this lone, barren outpost echoed back to her from the past. He’d been so alone for so long. Just like her.

Jon removed the swordbelt from his waist and strode across the room to stand Longclaw up next to the fireplace before adding a log to the lethargic flames.

“It’ll warm up quick,” he reported, as if sensing Dany’s discomfort. But she was disconcerted by more than the cold in the air. Even at these menial tasks, she could see the difference in Jon, the slouch of his posture, the wan look of his face. She moved to join him across the room where he stood warming himself by the fire.

“I just couldn’t do it,” he remarked, shaking his head. “I couldn’t sit up there at the feast, acting like nothing happened.”

“I know,” she nodded. “No one blames you, I’m sure.”

“But they do,” he insisted. “They elected me. And I did the best I could. Every day I did the best I could. It wasn’t enough.” He gestured vaguely at his chest, where underneath the material of his tunic Dany knew the hideous scars remained.

Some men took pride in their scars—trophies from the field of battle. Jon would be plagued by these forever, reminders of villainy instead of valor. The thought brought her anger back like the opening of a half-healed wound. The men who’d done this to him were little more than animals, and she wished Jon could see it—how unworthy they were of his leadership, his dedication. Yet he carried on in the belief that his death was some just punishment for his own poor decisions.

“It’s never enough, Jon,” she argued. “It’s taken me quite some time to understand it myself. I liberated the Slave Cities with the will to do something good, but I never expected how many people, even freed slaves, would come to resent me for it. When you lead others, there will always be someone who isn’t satisfied. Sometimes it’s your fault, sometimes it’s not. I refused to accept that. I tried to please everyone and still maintain my authority, and it’s how I ended up here. You must accept that the men who did this to you were wrong. You were brave. You made the hard choices. You’ve helped so many people and saved countless lives. You cannot—you must not—shoulder the responsibility for what was done to you. Regretting your actions will only bring you more sorrow, because it wasn’t your fault.”
He’d stepped nearer at some point during her outburst, drawn in by her conviction until they were inches apart. Nervous energy coursed through her veins, her hands fluttering restlessly at her sides. She wanted him to understand. She wanted him to smile. She wanted to touch him.

Jon’s eyes glistened at her in the firelight while he absorbed her words, his arms crossing thoughtfully. “Maybe,” he allowed. “Or maybe I’m just a shit ruler.”

Dany bristled, heat flooding to her cheeks. She opened her mouth to protest, to tell Jon that she’d happily take him down to the dungeons and force the traitors to admit to their wrongdoing herself, but he lifted a hand to stop her.

“Whether it was failure or fate,” he continued. “I don’t have regrets. Do you know why?”

“No,” she answered in a whisper, her curiosity piqued.

“If I could go back and do things different, joining the Watch, becoming Lord Commander, journeying to Hardhome. I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t change any of it. And it’s not because you’re right about ruling. Even though you are,” he added quickly, noting the flash of ire in her violet eyes. “But I’d do it all over again, every moment, even to the last, if that’s what it took to find you. I don’t know what I’d be without you, Dany. I don’t want to know.” He reached a hand to cup her chin, tilting it up until she met his eyeline. “What happened . . . It’s made me see things differently. I couldn’t waste my time putting on a show for them back there. I didn’t want to spend my night with them. I want to spend it with you.”

Her stomach flipped at his declaration, head light and tickling giddily. She’d ought to tell him how preposterous that was, that he’d be daft to deny the chance to reverse his own death. But she couldn’t say a thing, because she felt the same way. No amount of logic or reason could stop her from travelling halfway across the world again in a heartbeat if it meant seeing Jon’s face. She’d defy a hundred Harpy archers for him. Something in his presence melted her down like a candle before dragonflame. His velvet voice with its Northern burr was rough enough to break her barriers down. He made her soft. She hated him for it and she loved him for it.

He made her soft, so all she could say was, “I’m yours.”

They were close enough that the faint flicker of light from the fire gave Dany an intermittent look at her reflection in the umber pools of his eyes. She looked small and delicate, flushed cheeks, red lips, and pale breasts heaving against her bodice with every breath. A fruit ripe for the harvest, which was well enough if Jon was the one doing the picking.

She’d sought him out with the intention of comforting him, providing supportive company in his grief and confusion. But if he wanted to take his comfort in other ways, she was more than willing to oblige. Denying and ignoring their attraction had done nothing to snuff it out. Quite the contrary. The mere thought of it, of touching Jon, feeling Jon, pleasuring Jon made her squeeze her thighs together against the hot arousal pooling between them.

His hand snapped to the small of her back, his mouth a hard line as his eyes stripped her bare. The hairs on Dany’s neck and arms stood up under his charged stare, senses heightened with anticipation so that the rasp of fabric on her flesh and the sigh of Jon’s breath were sharp and visceral.

“Before the attack, I dreamed of you,” he told her, pausing to moisten his lips with his tongue. “In this room. In my bed.”

His other hand teased warm fingers over her neck, up to the delicate wing of her jawline, and Dany couldn’t help the way she leaned into his touch like a dog following the scent of roasting meat.
“Oh? Did we sleep well?” she managed to quip.

“We, ah . . . never quite made it to the sleeping bit,” he admitted, face reddening.

Dany’s eyes fluttered closed, the suggestion in Jon’s words inspiring images of his mouth on her, rough hands pinning her down on soft silks and lips supping his fill of her kiss, her teats, her cunt.

His grip at her jaw tightened, angling her face to receive his mouth on hers. His kiss was firm, claiming her without the slightest hesitation she’d detected in him before. His tongue shoved into her mouth, tasting of ale and sweetness and Jon, and Dany widened her lips to invite him.

She’d decided that she loved kissing him. Truthfully, she loved everything she did with Jon. She loved talking with him, and sharing meals with him, and taking walks with him in the forest. She loved listening to his voice with all its accented irregularities. She loved the way he listened to her, intently and fully, with interest and attention. She loved the familiar roughness of his scarred right hand and the strength of his arms, especially when they were wrapped around her.

But none of those things could match the disorienting, disarming pleasure of touching him like this. Jon kissed her like it was the last thing he’d ever do, as if his mouth had never known purpose until the day it tasted her skin. Kissing him was dizzying and exhilarating—so good it was a little scary, like having too much wine with supper and dancing a little too fast, like riding her Silver at a full gallop with her eyes closed. Like waking a dragon.

She forgot herself in the illicit thrill of being held by him a stone’s throw from where the others still gathered over their meal, a meal where she and Jon were both conspicuously absent. Let them think what they will, she thought as his mouth seared over hers. She dared anyone to so much as try and take him away from her again. Jon’s return was a blessing beyond her deserving. And she wasn’t about to stop him, not for false modesty nor propriety. Not now. She couldn’t—what with his mouth hot and wet on hers, his knee pressing up demandingly between her legs. She wanted this as much as he did.

But it wasn’t enough. She couldn’t get close enough, couldn’t feel him properly. She wanted to divest him of every layer of that somber black clothing, to lay him out on a downy bed and kiss every inch of his lovely, scarred skin. She wanted to straddle him and take him deep inside, to ride him with all the ferocity and feeling she’d been locking away for so long. Already she’d noticed the faintest impressions of his hardness through his trousers, and she knew how good it’d feel when he filled her up, like she was whole again in his arms. Like he was safe again in hers.

Dany sighed against his lips, longing heating her blood as she reached up to grasp at the front of his shirt, yoking herself to him. Jon snagged her lip between his teeth, shocking her still as his fingers dragged from her jaw to the front of her gown. The silken ribbons gave way with little resistance, her dress loosening at the shoulders, sagging under the weight of her aching breasts. The brush of his fingers against the bared flesh of her chest sent blooms of heat across her skin that corresponded with a persistent throbbing pulse between her legs. Dany rubbed herself shamelessly against his knee where it still held it up at the junction of her thighs, breaking the kiss for a gulp of air that was cold against the slick of her lips.

“Jon,” she murmured, relishing the shape of his name in her mouth once again, the press of her tongue to her palate on the end of the syllable. The word dissolved into an exhale of surprise when he cupped a breast warmly in one hand, rolling the pebbled peak of her nipple between thumb and forefinger with the other.

It didn’t occur to her to feel nervous. Not when he ducked forward to kiss at her neck, hard enough to mark her. Not when his hands kneaded her teats until she was weak and muzzy in the head with
pleasure. She had no room for anxiousness with Jon. There was only desire and affection and a pure, reckless joy that he was here, that she had him, body and soul, even if only for a short while.

And it was that affectionate gratitude that convinced Dany that Jon should be the one on the receiving end of the pleasure he was currently bestowing upon her.

“Wait,” she breathed, extricating herself from his embrace and taking a shaky step back. It was easy enough to shed the dress after Jon had loosened its fastenings before, and she shrugged out of the sleeves and bodice, letting the gown drop to the floor before stepping out of it, kicking off her boots, peeling down her smalls. When she stood naked before him his gaze wasn’t wolfish or lude. He looked her up and down with an almost worshipful appreciation.

“You’re perfect,” he whispered, eyes meeting hers.

Dany could only smile. It had always rung false, being complimented by supplicants, politicians, and any number of strange men she’d met in her life. Hearing Jon call her perfect—just as she was, exhausted and still a bit underweight, the ugly scar still glaring out from her thigh—made her feel womanly and voluptuous and desirable. It emboldened her.

“Sit,” she instructed, guiding him to the chair behind his desk and pushing lightly on his chest until he fell back into it. He obeyed, swallowing any protests with a bob of his throat.

Dany bent low over him, kissing him as her hands set to unlacing his breeches. She folded the leather placket open with little effort, shimmying the waist lower to reveal his manhood. Jon voiced a hum of surprise when she worked his erection free, his face paling when she crouched down to kneel on the floor before him.

“Dany,” he interjected haltingly, shaking his head. “You don’t need to—”

“I know that,” she said, gathering her hair in a twist and arranging it down behind her shoulders and out of the way. “I want to.”

Jon eyed her a little dubiously and nodded, so she turned her attention to his lap, taking him gently in hand. His cock was thick and pink, jutting out from wiry black curls. Arousal hardened him but the flesh was smooth when she leaned down to kiss him, parting her lips slightly so her tongue could peek through.

Ordinarily this wasn’t an act that Dany particularly enjoyed. Daario had cajoled her to it before, but she’d never seen much use in it until now. She wanted nothing so much as Jon’s pleasure, and the barest hint of her mouth on him had him squirming in his seat.

He groaned loudly at the first sweep of her tongue over the tip of his cock, his head falling against the chairback with a thunk. Dany took that for encouragement, opening her mouth to accept him inside, taking the length of him in deep until she could feel the nudge at the back of her throat. It was mildly uncomfortable, accommodating his size in her little mouth, and the floor was unforgiving against her bare knees. But she found she didn’t mind since it was Jon, every sensation new and exciting because she shared it with him.

She sealed her lips around him, sucking her cheeks in as she pulled back. The girth of his head slipped up between her lips and she slurped on it loudly, sucking in harder before bobbing forward to take him deep again. Jon hissed between gritted teeth, his hands coming to rest atop her head. His fingers tangled frantically in her hair, guiding her back-and-forth motion as she sucked him in and out of the wet heat of her mouth.
The shape and taste of him between her lips was intoxicating, every jerk of his hip and scrape of his nails on her scalp an assurance of just how good she was making him feel. The power of it spiraled through her, this ability to transfix him so, to put a dam up against all his negative thoughts, all his anxieties. She made it so he could think of nothing but this, of his cock in her mouth, of her on her knees for him, pouring all her desire and love into him with every move, every breath.

She couldn't quite swallow his length to the root, no matter her enthusiastic efforts, so she applied a hand where her lips couldn't reach, pumping him in time with her mouth. Her other hand reached under to his purse, massaging with her palm.

"Gods, Dany," he ground out, legs tensing on either side of her head, his grip on her hair tightening almost painfully. "I'm going to—I don't want—not like this," he stammered, voice strangled.

She wouldn't have minded much had he spilled in her mouth. Nothing could ever be dirty or strange between the two of them. But Dany understood his meaning all the same, his desire to make it last, to suspend this moment for as long as time allowed. She sat back against her heels and released him from her mouth with a flourish of her tongue over the head. Jon shuddered at the break of contact, slumping back in the chair and loosening his hands from her hair.

The salty flavor of his cock in her mouth had stoked her own lust, a trail of arousal seeping down her inner thigh. She could feel Jon's eyes burning into her there before dragging up her body to the smolder of her amethyst gaze.

"Come here," he pleaded, hands greedily reaching at her forearms to pull her in.

Dany rose and climbed into his lap. She perched gingerly over him, kneeling on either side of his thighs, her knees and shins lying flat across the seat of the chair. She was on full display to him this way, her teats almost at the level of his mouth, the thatch of silver hair at the seam of her thighs poised over his cock, red and turgid, a pearl of fluid weeping from him already.

"So beautiful," he rasped, ducking forward to kiss her chest, her neck, her chin. His hands roved over her as she settled hers on his shoulders to balance herself. He palmed the softness of her arse before skirting between her legs. His fingertips traced feather-light over the folds of her cunt, the slick of her opening, before he slid one inside.

The pressure made her shiver as he tested her tightness and heat, adding a second finger and flexing both inside. He looked up from his ministrations when her breath hitched, retracting his fingers and bringing them to his lips. He sucked both into his mouth, sampling her essence and closing his eyes with a gratified groan at her taste before knotting his other hand in her hair and yanking her in for a kiss.

Dany kissed him back fervidly, her fingernails digging at his shoulders through the fabric of his tunic. She could detect her own nectar on his tongue, strange and enticing, a reminder of just how badly she wanted him. She ground her hips against his lap restlessly, his cock twitching every time she made contact.

Jon sat back, face shining with perspiration, breath coming in pants. He took himself in hand and shifted his seat so he lined up with her. It was all the encouragement Dany needed. She sank down on him slowly, adjusting herself to his fullness inside. Her violet stare locked with his, eyes black from the fat spread of his pupils. His brow creased with concentration, his hands settled on her sides as her cunt sheathed him snugly.

Dany set a slow, languid pace, taking him deeply, his grip on her hips guiding her movements. She knew she'd found a good stroke when he leaned forward to kiss and suckle at her breast, hardening
her nipples with his lips and teeth. The pleasure was sharp and intense, her cunt clenching him tight, her belly coiling and fluttering. She buried her face in his hair, breathing in his scent. Her fingers combed idly through his ebon locks, unfastening them from the tie he’d worn at the feast.

Already she could feel her crisis nearing, each thrust of her hips and press of Jon’s lips bringing her closer. It was exquisite, easier than she was used to. They fit together like a lock and key. Jon intuited her desires and touched her where and when she wanted, as if he was already well acquainted with her body, her pleasure.

A desire to prolong it clashed with her own desperation for release. She wanted to savor this moment with Jon, the intimacy, the passion. For all she knew, it could be her first and last time with him, and the thought inspired a desperation to freeze time, let the world outside wait at their leisure so she might never leave his arms.

She paused, sitting back enough to see his face. A wordless look between them seemed to wake him up somehow, and with low growl in the back of his throat his arms caged her in and he stood without warning. His hardness slipped out of her at the sudden movement, a surprised squeal escaping Dany’s lips as he marched her to the bed, depositing her gracelessly on the furs. He toed his boots off impatiently, tearing the shirt over his head and tugging his breeches and smalls the rest of the way off.

Her breath caught at the sight of him, all of him, bared to her completely. In the firelight his skin shone from perspiration, smoothness rippling over hard muscle. His hair was loose and wild, his eyes darker than pitch. Even with the scars that tore across his middle he was breathtaking, young and comely in every way. And he looked at her with admiration in equal measure to her own, his expression all undisguised desire.

Jon fell upon her quietly, capturing her lips in brief kiss before his hands traversed down her body finding her thighs and coaxing them apart again. He brushed his right hand up the span of her sex, the roughness of his scarred fingers hesitating on the bud of her pleasure so she trembled.

“So wet for me,” he marveled, drinking in the sight of her, cunt open and inviting him.

Dany nodded mutely, speechless with want as he crawled closer on the bed before rising up on his knees between her legs. He looped his arms under her knees, lifting her arse from the furs toward him as he pushed himself inside her. A shaky sigh passed between them both as he filled her up to the brim, her cunt contracting around him. His strong arms bore her weight, biceps slippery with sweat where he held her up.

The angle afforded the utmost penetration, the head of his cock kissing the deepest core of her with every thrust of his hips. His eyes never left her, studying her face as he took her. Dany could only claw at the bed, pressing her shoulders to the mattress as he drove into her, reveling in the view of him looming over her. He was so handsome. Like a prince in the songs, she thought. But he fucked her with the confidence of a braggart soldier.

"Jon,” she crooned, arching into him. “You - mmm - feel so good .”

He grinned, a hand circling one of her ankles and resting it atop his shoulder, arm hugging her shin close. His face turned, lips pressing her calf with a kiss so sweet she thought her heart might break. The tenderness of his touch, the way he kept finding her eyes so he could hold her gaze while he moved inside her, she was overwhelmed. He was everywhere, engulfing her in sensation, drowning her in the smell and feel of him, and she never wanted to come up for air.

Just when she thought she couldn’t bear any more, Jon brought his thumb to his mouth to moisten it
on his tongue.

“What?” she managed to whisper, as he shoved his thumb through the silver curls over her cunt, feeling for the nub of nerves at the apex and then rubbing it there. She cried out shrilly, bucking at the intense pleasure of his hand on her while the hot length of him still sunk inside her again and again.

She was near tears from the unbearable bliss, and as she sobbed out his name, hair matted to her sweat-sodden skin, Dany knew what set Jon apart, knew the reason that the faintest nudge of his cock inside left her helpless. It was her love for him, draping every moment in a cloth-of-gold coating of beauty and wonder. It was a refrain in her head with each surge of his body against hers. *I love you, love you, love you.*

But still she couldn’t tell him so. Not when she came at last, sparks going off behind her eyes, her heart racing as her legs shook, toes squeezing together tight. Not even when Jon followed her over the precipice. He leaned against her leg with a grunt, shuddering as he jerked back to spill his seed on the bed.

He lowered her down, careful to avoid the spot, cradling her close. Dany wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing at his forehead blearily. His breath still came in great gusts, his pulse thrumming hard at her breast. His eyes were almost shy when he pulled back to look at her.

Jon’s arms assisted her up the bed as he eased the furs out from under them, letting her slip under for covers. Dany cuddled up against him when he nestled in beside her, relishing the feel of his skin on hers. Their legs threaded together, her head slotting nicely under his chin. She was utterly spent, her muscles pleasantly wobbly and tired, heart singing.

But always, *always*, doubt was Dany’s most faithful companion, a cloud threatening to blot out the glow of her joy even now. Because soon she would be gone from this place, where she couldn’t protect Jon. Where he couldn’t protect *her*. Selfishly, she’d taken comfort in his attentions over the past weeks. It was a novel experience, having someone looking after her the way Jon did, sharing her burdens, making her feel safe and special. And it might all be over before she ever grew used to this feeling of partnership, of security.

Jon’s arms wriggled around to meld her body to his, interrupting her reverie and dispelling her dark thoughts.

“How did that stack up to your dreams?” she wondered aloud.

Jon chuckled, a rumble she felt in her own chest.


She smiled against his neck. Yes, he felt like a dream to her, too. More the stuff of fantasies than a real man. But he was real, and he was hers. Her worries would keep for another day. For now, she was buzzing with happiness. With peace. With Jon.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading, guys :) I worked harder than you can believe on this
update and I'd love to hear if you liked it! Have a pleasant weekend <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!