She should have been more prudent, instead of falling into him like a spell. She should have handled this thing like the fatal tangle of thorns it was, instead of drinking the air from his lungs like the sweetest Arbor gold. She should have picked it up about the edges, holding it at arm’s length until she could find a safe enough place to rest it upon the earth and walk away forever.

(Chapters 1-5 are a collection of Missing Scenes from Season 7. Chapter 6 is when we begin our own journey into possibilities for Season 8)
This is my first foray into this fandom, though I have loved it for years. I just wanted to try to get into these characters that I love so much and am shipping... somehow.

Hope I got it right. Let me know what you think.
In Which Jon Snow Generally Has a Bad Go of It

It was not easy. It was not easy to sail from the familiar stone halls of his childhood, to cling to the mast as savage northern winds tossed his little ship from the The Bite and into the Narrow Sea. It was not easy to take in the jagged line of a southern, foreign castle against the dusky sky. It was not easy to drink in the shadows of winged beasts swirling on the shivering horizon and think it to be true. It certainly was not easy to hand over his sword, to watch men-- strange and foreign men-- carry their boat away to who knew where.

These things proved not easy. She proved to be impossible.

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“That could’ve gone worse.”

Jon couldn’t help but throw his gloves down a bit too forcefully at his advisor’s words. “Aye, one of her… blood riders, or whatever she sees fit to call them could’ve have chopped off both our heads, I suppose.”

Davos simply inclined a shoulder, as if that was precisely what he was getting at.

Jon ran his palms over his face, sinking into a nearby chair gratefully, pinching hard at his brow, trying vainly to keep the impending headache at bay. Davos seemed content to wander about the room, seemingly lost in an absurd fit of nostalgia.

“She put us up right though, that she did. These are the best rooms in the castle, save for the lord and lady’s quarters of course,” Davos said smilingly, looking through one of the small windows and onto the sea below.

“How do you never tire or grow somber, Ser Davos, or are you always so chipper?”

The dreary hold of Dragonstone lived up to it’s namesake, but the rooms the Dragon Queen had appointed them had small rival anywhere-- even in Winterfell, he had to admit. They currently reposed in a spacious solar, complete with chairs, couches, rich tapestries, a fine game table, and a handsome hearth made to look like a dragon’s gaping jaws. Very clever, he supposed. Two just as lavishly appointed sleeping chambers abutted the room. Everything smelled of slight damp and
abandonment, but all had been cleaned and freshened to the best of the scant household’s ability before their arrival. A small brazier of Essosi incense even burned in the corner in a vain attempt to banish the scent, although it seemed only to serve worsening his headache.

Davos laughed quietly at his jest, seeming to be in his element-- back at Dragonstone, back near the sea. He circled the room at least two more times and Jon thought he may have to do something drastic, before the man finally sat down in front of him, elbows on his thighs and hands clasped before him. “Dinner will be interesting.”

Jon sighed deeply, leaning back in his chair and crossing his legs. “And what strategy do you suppose we engage in for that, Ser?”

“I think we need to bide our time a bit, your Grace.”

Jon leaned forward, impatient. “We don’t have--”

“I know, I know, your Grace, but think of it,” Davos pleaded, throwing a palm up to stall him. “I have a mind to think that your dwarf friend left out a key part of the Queen’s request when he penned his raven to you.” Jon stilled at his words. He had had a similar suspicion. “I mean, this... Tyrion, is it? He knows you-- not well, as you said, but even still… you think he knows you well enough that sending a request to have an audience with a foreign queen so that you may bend the knee would strike him as a productive endeavor?”

Davos was so thoroughly right, Jon knew better than to think that the man actually needed his reassurance on this theory. He simply leaned back in his chair again, newly contemplative. “So you think that maybe she’s just...”

“Pissed off.” Davos supplied with a small grin.

“So your idea... is to not mention alliances, or the Night King, or any of it,” Jon said, “to… just play nice with her?”

Davos shifted uncomfortably, casting his eyes away for a moment before looking at him again and snorting. “Aye, I know, it’s a shit plan.”

+++

Dinner, they came to realize, would not be an audience with the Queen at all. Instead, they had their supper in the solar provided to them. Roasted gull with boiled potatoes, and a serviceable Dornish red to go along with it.

“What do you think happened to the Queen’s armada?” Jon inquired over a mouthful of potato.

“Not sure, your Grace. Whatever it was, it can't have been a blessing. I understand that is why we are stuck here with no royal dinner guests.”

Jon leaned back in his chair with a sigh, sated from the hearty meal, though he hardly ate at all. “Tomorrow, I am going to ask Tyrion for the leave of the Queen to go back to Winterfell.”

Davos stopped his chewing, looking at him with a worried crease in his brow. “As you wish, your Grace, but I think it foolish to leave after so hasty a visit.” He wiped his lips with a handkerchief. “And so long a journey.”

Jon shook his head, leaning forward to rest his elbows upon the table. “Aye, but there is no going anywhere with her, I know it.”

Davos looked at him a bit scandalized. “You only just met the woman, your Grace.”

Jon allowed himself a small, knowing smile. “I tell you true, ser Davos, I know a stubborn woman, and there is nothing to be gained here.”

Davos’ mouth quirked up at that, as if he were hiding a smile. “Not to offend, your Grace, but if memory serves me correctly, I would venture to say that you have a certain knack for,” he paused, searching for the correct term, twirling his knife, “…negotiating with stubborn women.”

Jon looked at him, stony and sullen. “I did not ask for a lesson in my history with women, Ser.”

Davos nodded, returning to his food. “Aye, but as your advisor it is my duty to be well-versed in history.” He looked back up at him, a playful glint in his eye. “It strikes me as disingenuous, your Grace, for a man such as yourself to back down so easily from a woman such as her. As fearsome a woman she may be.”
Jon shook his head, fairly miserable and also irritated that he could feel a flush creeping up his neck. “What would you have me do, Davos? With her dealing with a crisis such as this, we could be waiting days for an audience with her.” He lifted himself from his chair, beginning to pace over the handsome, slightly moth-eaten carpet at his feet. “We don’t have that time.”

Davos tilted his head agreeably, taking another bite of gull. It was a long time before he spoke again. “Beg your pardon, your Grace, but I cannot abide the thought of returning to Winterfell empty handed until we have exhausted all possibilities,” he leaned back in his chair and lifted his goblet to him, as if in a toast. “And neither, I suspect, will the Dragon Queen.”

+++  

Exhaustion didn’t begin to cover it. Infuriated was likewise a paltry word for what she was feeling. Defeated, angry, frustrated, helpless… all paled in comparison.

Which is perhaps why she could only sink into her bath and call her handmaidens away, wearisome of even the most quiet of company. She leaned her head against the bronze lip of the tub, trying very hard not to think of any of anything save for how the steaming water eased her strained muscles.

“Your Grace,” a quiet and familiar voice sounded from just beyond the open door of the bath chamber. She knew the voice well, and as reticent as she was, she could not refuse her most trusted advisor-- and perhaps the only person she could realistically name as her best friend.

“Come in, Missandei,” she called with no small amount of exasperation in her voice.

The woman entered trepidatiously, made reluctant by the tiredness in her words, but she was nothing if not a determined person. She lifted a jug of wine and two battered metal cups, offering a small smile. Dany had been expecting more news, more demands on her time-- plans, strategy, the whole lot. She raised an eyebrow in puzzlement. “I thought, perhaps…” Missandei started, trailing off as it seemed the last of her courage fled in the wake of Dany’s coldness.

Dany leaned forward in the tub, smiling in encouragement. Since reaching Dragonstone, times for her friend Missandei were more often than not usurped by advisor Missandei. She could not think of much else she would rather do at that moment. “You are a treasure, Missandei. Take the wine into my solar. I will be right out.”
Missandei beamed in relief, rushing back out as Dany stood from the water.

+++ 

“I thought all the world that he’d be some unwashed barbarian,” Missandei said with a snort and a none-too-graceful pouring of her fourth glass.

“Didn’t we all?” Dany asked airly. “I think that might be why I was… so…”

“So mean?” Missandei supplied. Dany looked at her friend, incredulous.

“You think I was mean?”

“I didn’t think you were mean, your Grace,” Missandei answered, leaning forward conspiratorially. “I know what ‘mean’ actually is from you. But our northern friend may have thought so.”

“What am I to do?” Dany asked, seemingly to the room at large although she and her friend were the only occupants. “I ask for fealty and he refuses and then asks me for help.” She drained her glass and placed it down more forcefully than she may have intended, “It’s preposterous.”

“I think,” Missandei began, pensive, “that you simply cannot trust the man. And, who would? Even if he’s not the unwashed barbarian we all thought he would be.”

“And how can I trust him? I know nothing of him.”

Missandei tilted her glass slightly to her, conciliatory. “Get to know him, your Grace. What harm could come of it? You need all the friends you can by your side, especially now.”

“I know,” Dany snapped. She sighed, rubbing her brow in frustration. “I’m sorry, my friend, I did not mean to be so curt.” She poured herself another glass of wine and leaned back in her chair. “Why must he be so stubborn?”
Dany wouldn’t be able to miss the small, wicked smile that her friend gave her then, even if she had her eyes closed. “Well, your Grace, right there is quite a good topic of conversation. ‘Lord Snow, I am also quite fond of being a stubborn ass, what do you think?’”

Dany’s eyes popped open in shock, before they both fell into a fit of laughter. “I suppose we do have that in common,” she said breathlessly.

“Yes, and perhaps… more ,” Missandei replied in a mockingly dramatic fashion, raising her eyebrows and vainly hiding her grin behind her glass.

Dany shook her head, amazed. “You are simply barbaric.”

The woman ducked her head, throwing up her hand in passive acquiesce. “He is quite comely, your Grace.”

Dany found it difficult to tamp down the blush rushing into her face, or to bite back her smile. “Perhaps,” she said and watched as the woman in front of her sat agape at her admission, “but that does not help me win a war.”

Missandei shrugged. “Maybe not, but it certainly doesn’t hurt .”

+++ 

After his late night conferring with Davos, and more recently with Lord Tyrion, he’d set his resolve.

Both men were-- for their own reasons-- correct. This knowledge did nothing to assuage his uneasiness, however.

He could not identify the center of his discontent. He knew that no small part was his feeling like a prisoner-- only able to leave if the Queen so granted. There were other, more abstract stressors that he could not wholly parse out from his troubled mind. Perhaps it was the general feel of Dragonstone, with its walls of black dragons, snarling in promise of violence, eyes malevolent and dark as ash. The old keep’s insidious smell of salt and soot that he did not know if he would ever
scrub from his clothes.

When he really thought on it, though they weighed heavily, these things were second to the pit in his stomach occupied by her.

She made him… uneasy. Most royals did, if he was honest. He was bastard-born and reared, he was not meant to keep the company of the likes of her. No matter how many times he told himself this, he could not help feeling there was something more to it than that. She spoke much like any royal would, upon their meeting, but she also spoke of justice, of liberation, of dark struggles and deep convictions. She glowed when she spoke of the people who had followed her-- they were second to none. Even, it seemed, to the three miracles she brought into the world flying over the castle of her birth.

He realized, reluctantly, that he admired her. For her strife, her passion, her people. And it was the last thing in the world he ever thought possible to feel for a Targaryen queen looking for her rightful realm in his homeland.

If not for the coming war, the grave danger his people were in, he would have never have come here. Never had met her-- at least on fairly peaceable terms.

And, for more reasons than one, he was starting to wish he never had.

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“Lord Snow will have the dragon glass.”

Her Hand sighed, smiling in no small relief. “I am glad of it.”

She turned away, looking through the open columns of her War Room, down to the churning surf below.

She heard Tyrion walk toward her, coming to stand beside her in silence. But, if she knew anything about Tyrion, is was that he would not stay silent for long. “Something troubling you, my Queen?”
She paused, considering, before turning towards him, hands folded in front of her. “He’s quite… odd.”

“Well, I suppose we’re all odd in own ways, your Grace,” he said, bouncing nervously on his heels. “What makes you say that of our Lord Snow?”

She shook her head, turning back to the sea. “He doesn’t seem to…” she paused for a moment, taking a frustrated breath, “well he doesn’t seem to adhere to the rules of most of the men I’ve grown accustomed to.”

Tyrion snorted at that. “You should have met his father.”

She raised her eyebrows at this, but did not inquire further.

“Forgive me, your Grace, but-- do you like him, at least? He is as faithful a friend you could ever hope for, and if you don’t mind me saying I think that there is more potential to this alliance than you may--”

“We shall have supper tonight,” she interrupted, knowing, suddenly, where that sentence was probably going to go. “Prepare a boar, if we can get one. Fish, if not. Gather a band… I should enjoy that greatly. Inform our guests, so they may prepare accordingly.”

Tyrion opened and closed his mouth silently before bowing, leaving her alone with the sea and the carved Seven Kingdoms at her back.

+++ 

Dinner that night was a subdued affair. Even so, him and Davos were seated to the left of the Queen, Lord Tyrion beside them and enjoyed a fine meal of poached salmon and boiled turnip greens, with a rich brown bread and a thin sauce made with milk and leeks. A small, slightly off-tone band of a drummer, piper and fiddler played somewhat dispiritedly in the corner. Even with the show of hospitality he had been given, Jon was uneasy, pushing his food about on his plate and sticking to drinking water rather than getting stupid on wine.

“Lord Snow,” the Queen at his side said just as the dessert arrived, poached pears over a thin pastry with a honey syrup. It was the first thing she had said to him since he had arrived in the
Queen’s solar. As such, he almost jumped out of his hauberk with shock.

“My la-- your Grace,” he returned, inclining his head to her.

By his good fortune, she didn’t seem to mind his slip up, but her shoulders were tense and her hands were folded tightly in her lap. “I fear that I’ve perhaps been… harsh on you,” she said, as a servant poured syrup over her pears. “I’m sure you understand the stresses of ruling, and they have been particularly… great since I landed on Dragonstone.”

Jon nodded. “Aye, your Grace. Perhaps that has been what has plagued me as well.” He found it troubling that he couldn't quite meet her eyes, gazing intently at him from her slightly higher-set chair. “Perhaps I owe you an apology as well. I am not in the practice of holding audience with noble ladies.”

She blinked at him, brows raised slightly. “I find that hard to believe, Lord Snow. Being a king I should have thought you would have conferred much with ladies of noble blood.”

_They aren't the bloody Dragon Queen_, was what he almost said if he hadn't been suddenly gulping the wine that had languished in front of him for the entirety of the meal. Now faced with the very real prospect of conversation with this woman, he figured a little liquid courage couldn't hurt. “Aye, I suppose you're right in that, your Grace,” he said, placing his glass down. “But the noble ladies of the North are not of the same ilk as you.”

He couldn't be sure, in the dim candle-light, but he would have sworn to the Old Gods and the New that the fearsome Dragon Queen of Essos _blushed_, though she showed no other sign of discomfiture. Did she mistake his statement as… _flirting_? Jon Snow did not know many things, but he was sure that he did not know how to flirt. Besides, it had only been the truth, nothing more. “Tell me about your home, Lord Snow. You speak so fondly of it, and I shall rule over it some day, so I should greatly wish to know more.”

_There she is_, he thought, taking another swig of wine. Davos, beside him, offered a bracing smile and nod. Jon turned back to the Queen. “To be true, your Grace, it is not much but cold moors, cold forests, and cold rivers,” he said and she smiled, amused. “But it's home. It always has been. I'm more a Northman than I am a bastard, a Man of The Night’s Watch, or the King in the North. And the people of the North-- that's how they feel as well. It comes before lands and titles and all else. It's as much geography as it is in their hearts.”

The Queen looked at him then, a very strange expression blooming on her face. She looked _unsettled_, as if coming to a terrible realization. “I know just how that feels,” she finally replied
quietly, turning back to her dessert.

Jon felt as though a door had been cracked open and he had only begun to walk forward and grasp the handle when a cold blast of wind had caught it up and slammed it back shut. He sat back in his chair, his brow creased with defeat and incredulity. He had only spoken true, he had not meant to offend.

Davos nudged him a bit with his elbow, leaning in to speak to him candidly. “Ask her a question, your Grace. Show some courtesy.”

Jon looked at him bewildered. What question could you possibly ask a woman like her without coming off as quaint, trite, condescending? Davos simply waved him on, as if he wasn’t pushing him into the lion’s den. He took another sip of wine and turned back toward her. “Forgive me, your Grace, but I have long wondered how dragons came to be in the world again.”

She seemed surprised, and maybe even a bit pleased by this question. Jon couldn't help but feel a small spark of triumph at this desirable response. “Well, Lord Snow, I speak truly when I say that it is not a happy tale.”

That put him back in his place, just as quickly as he got out of it. “Your Grace, I did not mean to offend. If you’d rather--”

“No, no, it's quite allright,” she said, in what could be the first hint of softness he had ever heard in her voice, leaning closer to him. “After all, things worth having are almost never given, are they?” Her eyes were alight with something… strange. Something savage and fierce and inescapable. “You must fight for them.”

Jon was quite certain his heart had stopped. “Aye, your Grace,” he managed through a small space left between the immense weight that had suddenly solidified in his chest.

“But that is a story for another time,” the Queen said, suddenly chipper and airy. She placed her hands on the arms of her chair and lifted herself up. “I am sure you are still weary from your travels, Lord Snow, Ser Davos, and I have much to do before I retire.” She waved a hand to the room at large. “Please, stay as long as you'd like. Enjoy the wine and the band... if you can,” she ended a bit ominously, with a pointed look at Tyrion. The man in question glanced away, shifting uncomfortably on his feet.
Jon hadn't realized that he had stood with her, as if pulled on a string, until he looked around and noticed that Ser Davos was only just now standing. He wanted to say… something. Anything that might get her to stay and gods he was bad at this and gods he was coming to realize that he might just be ever so fucked.

He could only bow, “Your Grace.”

“I shall see you tomorrow, Lord Snow, after dawn. I should very much like to see this dragon glass you hold in such high regard.”

When the Queen and her various attendants had filtered out, he flopped back in his chair, running a hand over his brow and idly wondering if flinging himself off of one of the many high cliffs surrounding the castle might be a better fate than facing the Queen again tomorrow. “That could have gone worse,” his advisor said from his side.

“Ser Davos, if you say that one more time while we are here, I shall have your head.”

Davos only laughed, damn him, and returned to his meal. “As long as you're the one swinging the sword, your Grace, I shouldn't mind.”

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Chapter Summary

“I depart in the morning.”

Her lack of greeting or pleasantries seemed to rock him, as if he stood on the deck of a storm-tossed ship. He looked up at her, standing on the dias, question writ large on his face. Is this why she called him from the comfort of his chamber?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Isn’t their survival more important than your pride?

The words rang cruelly in his head. The same words he had said a lifetime ago, to The King Beyond The Wall. A man chosen by his people to rule, chosen for the very fact that he would not sell his people’s faith in him to the highest bidder. I hope you’re up there, Mance, laughing at me right now, you fucking bastard.

She had looked at him in that cave, skin bathed in fire, as if she knew she had him. As if she had known what her words would do to him, because she knew just as well what they would do to her. He could only stare, her eyes piercing him as good as any lance, as he hefted the mighty weight of a world that held her in it.

“My pride is of no concern in this matter, your Grace,” he had finally returned, voice as ragged as old sailcloth.

She had smiled at him then and he had to look away, his eyes burning with the pearly ghost of her after-image as they adjusted to the dark of the cave. “We should be getting back.”

+++ You’re not different, you’re just more of the same.

She paced around her bedchamber, her mind in a rolling fury, turning Jon Snow’s words over and over until she could almost feel them wearing at the edges like an old coin.

She sat on the edge of her bed, worrying the end of her plait with her fingers. She had been so ready, standing on that beach… her blood had sung with the promise of violence, so heated and fuming with the desire for vengeance that she had felt dizzy with it. Anger and a keen fear had driven her then—fear that what remained of her people would flee from her if she did not fight for them, fear that she may be deemed a coward and cast aside for anyone more worthy. The drive to do something so terrible as what she was contemplating— it chilled her to her core. She had casted about with a rope, looking for someone to pull her into calmer waters, and he had been the one to do it. The one she had chosen to, steadfastly, remind her of who she was. Of why she was here and why she was not only the rightful ruler of this realm, but the worthy ruler… the better ruler.

She stood from her bed and turned to one of her handmaidens. “Gather my small council.”
He sat in the solar, legs crossed, hand pressed to his mouth, somber as the slate sky beyond the window. The fire hissed its slow death in the hearth before him, with no attentive keeper to nourish it. Davos sat quietly in the corner, his quill scratching slowly as he dictated scrolls to White Harbor and Winterfell entreating help for transporting the dragon glass.

They were silent for some time, Davos needing all the concentration he had in order to write. Jon could have penned the notes in half the time, but he never begrudged his aide an opportunity to practice.

“You gave sound advice today, your Grace,” Davos said, finally breaking the silence as he dashed sand on the last scroll.

Jon looked at him, silent for a time. “I am not so sure if what I gave could have been considered advice.”

“Oh?” He asked, rolling up the scroll to press the seal upon it. “What would you call it then? Praise?”

“Must we call it anything?” Jon said, letting his arm fall in exasperation. “They were simply words. Spoken truly, but nothing more.”

“Surely you don’t mean to say that words spoken truly mean nothing, your Grace.”

Jon could not think of anything meaningful to respond to this, so remained silent. Davos groaned as he stood up from the desk and walked over to the hearth. He fed two logs into the fire and stoked it vigorously. It was only then Jon realized that it was nearly nightfall.

There was a soft rap on the door and Jon had half a mind to ignore it, but Davos rightfully thwarted those plans. “Enter.”

“My Lord,” Missandei said with a shallow bow to him, “Ser,” she said turning to Davos as he stood. “The Queen requests an audience with Lord Snow.”

Jon felt his limbs lock and his breath flee from him like a startled bird. He looked to Davos who only tilted his head toward the door, looking entirely too pleased at this news. He nodded at Missandei and followed her haltingly through the door as if she were leading him to a public execution.

She turned around to face him when he entered. The throne room was dark, only a single brazier being lit. Their breath puffed before them in ephemeral curls of steam in the chill of the night. He stood before her, brooding and as uncomfortable as ever, hands worrying behind his back.

“I depart in the morning.”

Her lack of greeting or pleasantries seemed to rock him, as if he stood on the deck of a storm-tossed ship. He looked up at her, standing on the dias, question writ large on his face. *Is this why she called him from the comfort of his chamber?*

She felt the question in his eyes settle its considerable weight upon her. The realization that she had no true reason for requesting an audience with him was slowly seeping in. When she had told Missandei to bring him to her she had only felt certain that she wanted to see him before she left.
Now, with him standing before her confused and disgruntled, she knew that had been her only motivation.

She pulled herself straighter and walked towards him, striving to keep her hands steady, wondering what to say to justify her decision to bring him here. “I return in three days,” she said, stopping at some distance from him. “What forces I leave here are yours for the mining of the dragon glass.”

He looked at her, eyes shining with gratitude and nodded. She stepped closer to him. “While I am away, they will be under your protection.”

His eyes flashed at this and he looked to be about to protest. It took a moment, but he wrested himself into a reluctant control and nodded. “I will do my best, your Grace, to serve them truly.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “I know you will, Lord Snow.”

He flashed a smile back, quick as a flick of a blade. It was the first time she had seen that on his face and she was left dizzy and dazed in the wake of how much she liked it. Heat grew from her chest to the very tips of her hair.

She had the sudden, heady, ridiculous desire to give him everything then. To give him his ship, his sword, her armies and dragons. This foolish, stubborn, honest, loyal, good Northern lord. The notion was gone as quickly as his smile, but she felt weak and hollow in the aftermath all the same. “We shall talk more when I return, Lord Snow,” she said, turning to leave.

“Your Grace,” Jon called after her. She froze, turning to look at him over her shoulder. “Pardon, your Grace, but what is it that you plan to do?”

She smiled, slow and small. “To be a different kind of Queen, Lord Snow.”

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He watched the massive beast lift itself into the air. On land, it seemed a clumsy and cumbersome thing, but in the air, it banked as graceful as any falcon upon the tip of a wing. He could not help but stare at the pale nimbus of her at the crest of the dragon’s neck, resolute and beautiful, in the same way the nightshade is beautiful. Dark and delicate blooms belaying little of the lethal force inside.

+++  

What a peculiar creature Jon Snow proved to be.

Varys very much enjoyed his company, if only for his own entertainment. Watching the Northern Lord, attempting to figure how he was put together, was diverting. Quite like bending over the strewn parts of a clockwork, finding each gear and cog and seeing what made it click. This one proved difficult, many parts hidden or else lost and needing to be found.

It was not just by chance that he found the man at the cave-mouth, supervising the mining of the dragonglass. “Lord Snow,” he bowed, hands tucked into his sleeves. “I know you are busy, but may we speak a moment?”

He watched Jon lean back in his stance just slightly, how his eyes narrowed in suspicion, darting to his advisor at his side. Vary could not very well blame him, but catching the King in the North off-guard was precisely what he had intended to do. After some hesitation he strode toward him and Varys turned to lead him further down the beach.
“Forgive me for pulling you away from your duties, Lord Snow,” he said as he stopped and turned to face him. The other man simply looked at him, eyes dark and guarded.

“How are you finding your rooms, my Lord? I hear they are some of the best in the realm. Surprising, considering the general… well, bleakness of Dragonstone, don’t you think?”

“My rooms are fine, my Lord,” he replied flatly, looking ever more impatient. Not a man for small talk, I see. All the better.

Varys mustered the most charming smile he could and leaned against a nearby stone. “Do you know who I am, Lord Snow?”

The man shifted his weight, uncomfortable and confused. “Aye.”

“And what do you think of me?”

“I think that you can’t be trusted.”

Varys nodded agreeably. “This is wise, my Lord,” he said. “There is a certain… power in being a man who can’t be trusted, however. It gives you a certain… freedom to move about.”

Jon looked at him questioningly, but did not respond. Varys smiled coldly. “How do you feel, Lord Snow, about me sitting on the small council of Queen Daenerys?”

He gazed at him for a long moment before glancing away at the sea. “What is this?” he asked loudly, spreading his palms at his side. “Why should I care? Why are you asking me this, my Lord? I have work to do--”

“What if I told you that I have a plan,” he interrupted coolly. “A plan to rid us both and this realm from the blight that would be her reign and her dragons?”

Varys watched as the man’s skin drained of color as if the incoming tide licking at the soles of his boots were bleeding all the hue away. “Why would you do this?” His voice sounded stifled, as if he were forcing it through the smallest of spaces.

“You said yourself, my Lord, I am not a trustworthy man,” Varys replied with a shrug. “But that is because I am only loyal to the good of the people. I am loyal to an idea, and ideas are quite larger than lords and ladies and kings and queens.”

He shook his head, a crease of disgust folding his brow. “You would betray your Queen?”

“As I said, lords and ladies are nothing compared to an idea,” he shifted his feet upon the sand, looking at him appraisingly. “And you, my Lord, are what is good for the people. Not Daenerys Targaryen.”

Jon Snow stood before him as if he were having trouble finding the strength to stand, his face growing slack and pallid like he may be sick any moment. “Think of it, my Lord… who do you know to be truly best for this realm?” Varys asked, standing up and stepping toward him. He could hear his shallow breaths. “Who better than to control the entire continent? To raise the forces to take on the White Walkers? You think it a foreign girl who craves only fire and blood?”

He shook his head slowly. “You overestimate me, my Lord,” he said through gritted teeth. “I do not want it.”

Varys raised his eyebrows at that. “It does not matter what you want, my Lord Snow. The desires
of men is what has caused all the strife that inhabits this world. The only way to rule, the only way to fix this world, is to throw your desires to the wind.” He sniffed, looking at the other man, his entire body pulled taught as a bowstring. “You know what I know, my Lord. Daenerys Targaryen is a tyrant, and is not fit to--”

“She is not,” Jon said darkly, his fists clenching at his sides.

“I have known her much longer than you, my Lord.”

“You don’t know of what you speak.”

“Oh, I think I do,” Varys replied airily, frowning. “Why protest so, my Lord? This would be most advantageous for you.”

The man before him had been slightly slouched in on himself for the duration of their talk, but now he drew himself to his full height, his eyes taking on a blazing and dangerous glint. If his sword had been belted to his hip, Varys had no doubt that he would have palmed the pommel. Instead, his hands flexed on nothing, itching for violence. “You’d be dead before you could even touch her.”

Varys raised his eyebrows in mock confusion, barking a derisive laugh. “You think I would swing the sword? I know you to be smart, Lord Snow, not naive. I would have one of my little birds do it. I have them stationed all over the castle.”

He shook his head furiously, his breath coming in quicker, greater gasps now. “I’ll root them out. None would be left to protect you. I will see you dead. Whether by my hand or her’s.”

“Then why not bend the knee?” Varys nearly shouted, his voice taking on a wild and fierce edge, eyes gone cold and accusatory. “Why not pledge fealty to a Queen you hold in such high regard, Lord Snow?”

The Lord of Winterfell winced, stiffening, as if he had galloped head on into a tree branch. He looked at him, eyes wide and disbelieving. Varys simply stared back, allowing the man to take it in. Finally, stumbling back a step as if pushed, he said “This was a bloody setup?” Still, Varys waited, silent, biding his time. “Did she ask you to do this?”

Varys smiled thinly at that. “I am no trustworthy man, my Lord, but trust me in this: the Queen would have never have asked this of me.”

He shook his head, looking very much like a dazed man dragged ashore after a shipwreck. “Why do this? Why… toy with me in such a way?”

“To know your nature, Jon Snow,” Vary replied sternly. “You may not think it wise to trust me and likewise I do not think it wise to trust a man without getting to know them properly, especially when they are nearing my Queen’s heart.”

Jon Snow stood in the surf, up to the tops of his feet now, and to Varys he looked… heavier, somehow, weighed down and sodden with terrible and warring truths. He stepped closer to him, a hint of sympathy in his face. “I trust that I know you better now, Lord Snow, and I am very pleased at what I have learned.” Jon Snow did not meet his eyes and Varys patted him on the shoulder. “Pledge fealty, or something else, my Lord. I tell you true when I say that your loyalties, political or otherwise, will not prove fruitless.” He gave the man what he hoped to be a reassuring squeeze of the shoulder, before beginning his long trek back up to the castle.

It had been a long day’s work.
Wow. I really did not expect the outpour of support from you guys, but I am truly blown away by the response to this. I wish I had time to respond to every one of you and let everyone know just how much I appreciate your kind words. Really, you have no idea how much it means to me. :)

I pulled a bit of a Wild Card out of my sleeve for this one. I'm kind of nervous about it, it was kind of a risk, but so much fun to write! Hope you enjoy, and as always let me know what you think!

BTW, I've written some Purely Speculation Scenes based on the episode five preview. So, you all might be seeing those before the episode premiers, who knows?
An Echo in the Blood

Chapter Summary

“I can’t help but think…” Dany started as she looked back up at Tyrion who had popped one eye open to look at her. “Well, is there no better option for us?”

Tyrion shifted, leaning forward in his chair. “Your Grace, have you ever heard the saying ‘it’s not a great plan, but it’s the one we’ve got?’”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The usually quiet and somber castle was bustling when he awoke that morning-- the air charged with careful excitement and the general busyness that fell upon a household’s staff when their Queen was returning.

Before descending into the mines to oversee the day’s work, his feet took him to a high cliff. The very same one that he had come to before in his more pensive moments, of which had been many as late. He was not sure why he had the mind to go there, now. The Queen’s return meant very little to him and his business on the island.

But something strange and needling drew him there that wind-swept morning. A thirst for the sight of her, atop her dragon and girded by the new-risen sun had no small part in it, he knew-- though he preferred not to think of that.

There was something else in his drive to be on that blustery slope that morning. There was something… odd in his fascination with the dragons. He assumed it was the general air of wonder at seeing such beasts in the flesh. Especially being well used to what he had seen in books-- crude illuminations that could never begin to do them justice. But his draw to them was also fundamental, something altogether primal -- an echo in his very blood that felt as old as the earth itself.

He had been expecting the Queen to pass right over him-- that way he could get his fill, ensure that she was unhurt, and be away quickly.

His breath flew from his lungs as he realized the dragon was slowing, circling around him, before coming to the earth with an almighty thud.
Fear would be what any sane man would have felt, upon seeing the thorny beast gallop towards them, jaws agape and bristling. But Jon felt an overwhelming thrum of exhilaration, of *excitement* as his heart hammered somewhere in his throat.

The creature stared him down, seeming to size him up. The eyes-- glowing with a great and an infernal fire were so very *aware*. He never thought he could look at a being such as a *dragon* and feel the odd sensation of being *known*. He found himself peeling off a glove, suddenly needing to know this beast of magic and mythos for himself.

His palm warmed, like touching a basin of hot water and a *gladness* fell over him like a heavy cloak.

And the woman these creatures bowed to, protecting her with fire and hide, was suddenly in front of him, looking as stunned as he felt as the dragon lifted itself back into the sky.

They spoke of dragons, and he tried very hard to pass off the incredible thing that just transpired as nothing more than petting a dog.

When she looked away, to gaze rapturously up at these winged legends swirling above them, he had to catch himself. To look at her at that moment was to peer over the edge of a cliff, to see just how deadly a fall from it would be. He was left dizzy and breathless at just how towering the height was.

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For the first time since her wild flight from Slaver’s Bay, Dany had felt out of control of Drogon. He had seemed to single the lone figure upon the cliff out-- as if spotting a fresh and tasty piece game. She feared for one instant that her child may do the unthinkable.

She had always felt a certain kinship with Jon Snow in that they were both leaders, chosen by their people, but the overwhelming sense of familiarity she felt now at seeing another living soul touch a dragon-- *her* dragon-- it proved to be an enormous and weighty thing that left room for little else as it settled in her chest.

She trusted Drogon, almost more than any human in her life. And Drogon had entrusted this Northerner to approach him, to touch him as he had never let another person do before, looking back at her in what could almost be a benediction.
Very suddenly, she did not feel quite so alone in the world, and she hurried to pack this foreign feeling away as quickly as she could—before it simply swallowed her whole.

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When he thought of it later, alone in his dark solar, the last time he had felt such a bitter and acidic curl in his belly was back in Winterfell. Watching the legitimate children of Ned Stark be the focus of a mother’s love.

And he had felt that very same thing at seeing her embrace a strange man as if an old friend. Or familiar lover.

The measure of his shame at this realization could scarcely be carried by a lesser man.

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“What troubles you, my Queen?”

She smoothed the front of her dress, her body brimming with a skittish, nervous energy that infuriated her… which only served to worsen her mood.

“Nothing more than what troubled me yesterday, Lord Tyrion,” she said, trying her best to sound mildly exasperated at his inquiries rather than like a snarling panther backed into a corner. She was quite certain that her attempts had failed.

“I sense that you might not be entirely genuine in this statement,” he responded wryly, pouring her a glass of wine and handing it over to her. She took a grateful sip, glad that his company could prove useful in one aspect at least. He prodded her no further, but gazed levelly at her as he settled back in his chair.

“I have just gotten Ser Jorah back in my service and now he is to go on some… suicide mission.”
Tyrion raised his eyebrows at this. “Ser Jorah is as brave a man as any,” he said as he set down his glass and folded his hands in his lap. “And brave men are too often stupid.”

Dany stared at the far wall, shaking her head helplessly. “Why do the gods find this to be such a winning combination?”

Tyrion shrugged. “I try not to think overly much of the mysteries of gods and demons.” He settled back in his chair, closing his eyes as if to nap. “I much prefer the worldly and mundane.”

Despite her dark mood, Dany could not help but smile at this as they lapsed into a peaceful and protracted silence. Dany always enjoyed this about her Hand. He was liable to run his mouth to be sure, but was also graceful enough to know when silences could prove more productive. She sipped her wine and tried vainly to calm her troubled mind.

“I can’t help but think…” Dany started as she looked back up at Tyrion who had popped one eye open to look at her. “Well, is there no better option for us?”

Tyrion shifted, leaning forward in his chair. “Your Grace, have you ever heard the saying ‘it’s not a great plan, but it’s the one we’ve got’?”

Dany simply blinked at him, turning her face away.

“I know that it does not comfort you my Queen,” he said with a tired sigh, “but if I know anyone to succeed in such an endeavor I would venture to say it would be the Lord Snow and those that follow him.”

She looked at him curiously at this. “Why do you say such things about him? I thought you did not know him well.”

Tyrion looked at her, a bit helpless. “I don’t, your Grace, but surely you’ve come to believe this of him in your time with him?” He poured her more wine and sat back in his chair, waving a hand. “He certainly has me convinced.”

Dany looked down at her hands, now suddenly very interested in her cuticles, wishing she could not feel the warmth creeping up her neck or the pulse in her throat.
“When I met Jon Snow, he was just a boy, really,” Tyrion continued without prompting. “He was… well he was an angsty fellow, if I’m being honest. Not the likes of which I usually kept company in those days. I didn’t like him much at first.” Dany looked up at him at this, surprised. Tyrion grinned. “But he proved himself to be a good lad, single-minded and passionate.” He paused at this, giving her a very pointed look that made her look down at her hands again. He cleared his throat. “He was very hung up on being a bastard, of not feeling like a true Stark. It tormented him so much, that he left his own home forever to find purpose and glory with the men of the Night’s Watch.” Tyrion barked a laugh as he reached for his glass, taking a sip. “If that doesn’t make you a lunatic, I certainly do not know what does.”

Dany creased her brow at this. She had heard this of Jon Snow before-- of his being a man of the Night’s Watch. He had even told her himself, but she hadn’t really thought on it much until now. “Tyrion, forgive me… my knowledge of the ways of Westeros is still basic at best, but isn’t the oath of the Night’s Watch taken for life?”

Tyrion looked rather thoughtful at this. “Well… yes. I suppose it is.”

“And what is the punishment for forsaking such vows?”

Tyrion’s eyebrows raised at that. “It is death, your Grace.”

Dany tapped a worried finger upon the table. “Jon Snow… he does not strike you as a type of man to forsake a vow or to attempt to escape the punishment of such a crime?”

Tyrion shook his head slowly, evermore thoughtful. “No, your Grace. Quite the opposite really.” He rapped a finger on the side of his glass. “There are other caveats to that oath as well. A man of the Night’s Watch can hold no lands or titles.”

Dany arched an eyebrow at this information, now insatiably curious. “Do you have any theories as to how Jon Snow was released from his oath and is now holding all the North as its proclaimed King?”

Tyrion shook his head, a bit lost. “I haven’t, your Grace. I suppose, until now, that my assumption was that the people-- well that the people simply made an exception for him in a time of great strife.”
Dany sat back in her chair, thoroughly unconvinced at this. Not for the first time since meeting Jon Snow she felt as if she were not getting the whole story from him and for reasons she could not name it troubled her tremendously. “Is it not correct to assume that only death may release a man from these vows?”

Tyrion looked at her, a bit exasperated. “You're thinking of what Ser Davos said again, aren’t you?”

Dany shook her head, frustrated and confused. “What else could I think of now?”

“Your Grace, it was simply a turn of phrase. He wanted to impress you--”

“I know!” She exclaimed, angry with how often she had heard this flimsy excuse today. “I know, but I can’t help but think…” She leaned back in her chair, tired and helpless in the face of this mystery.

Tyrion was silent a moment, draining his glass. “Well, regardless of this whole Night’s Watch business, your Grace, Jon Snow has grown into every bit an honorable man as his father was. And his father, though a tad foolish, was one of the best men in all of Westeros.” Dany looked on as her Hand’s face fell, his brow falling into deep lines of melancholy. “I can only hope that we can break the wheel that killed a good man like Ned Stark before it gets to Jon Snow.”

His words sent a ripple of fear and determination so heated and sudden through her she almost reeled in her seat. She placed a hand upon his, curled tightly over the end of the arm of the chair. He looked up at her and she was stunned to feel the warmth of angry tears in her eyes, to see prisms of color crack into her vision. “I will not let that happen,” she said through gritted teeth, her voice fuming with deadly promise.

Her Hand smiled at her, small but adoring. “I know you won’t, your Grace. I know.”

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“Well, that could ha--”

“If you say it again--”
“I know, I know, you’ll have my head, your Grace.”

Jon waved an impatient hand at him from the desk where he was attempting to pen a raven to Sansa at Winterfell. He would not allow Davos to write this one, as time was in so short supply. “Well, tell me your thoughts, Ser Davos, as I know that I cannot escape them.”

“Well, your Grace, I think it bold of you to assert the legitimacy of your rule to the Dragon Queen in such a way.” Davos said as he mindlessly poked at the fire in the hearth.

Jon returned to his letter. “What I said was nothing more than truth.”

Davos peered at him, hanging the poker up upon the mantle and unclipping his cloak. “Aye, you speak truly, your Grace, as you ever have.”

Jon stilled his quill at that, leaning back in his chair and looking over at his advisor. “And?”

Davos shrugged, feigning innocence. “Do you truly think the Queen regards you as a stranger? Or you her?”

He leaned forward again, irritated and placing his quill a bit too forcefully back upon the scroll. He cursed under his breath. “Stranger or no, what does it matter?”

“How can it not, your Grace?” Davos asked, sounding a little astonished. “You and her are not strangers, and the sooner you come to realize that, your Grace, the better you’ll be for it.”

Jon shook his head. “You are not making sense, Ser.”

Davos strode around the little alcove of couch and chairs in front of the fire to stand before him at the desk. Jon sensed frustration coming off the man in waves. “You are a right damned fool when you want to be, your Grace.”

Jon stared up at him, stunned and a bit scandalized. He threw his quill down and let himself fall
back into his chair. “Speak your mind, Ser Davos,” he said darkly.

“You know as well as I do, your Grace, that the Queen admires you and you her. Now, I’m not trying to play some foolish damned thing such as matchmaker. I can’t claim to know your heart, but I do know that holding such a valuable ally such as her at arm’s length won’t do you or your people any good.” He huffed a breath, looking away from him. “I know that you think that this is no time for silly things such as romance or some such, but what is needed right now is friendship in the very least, your Grace. And I do not want to see that wasted for the sake of pride or whatever dark thing that troubles you.”

Jon could only sit under the wilting heat of his advisor’s gaze, feeling such a wild swirl of emotions that he felt blank and flat in the face of it. He looked up at the other man, and something in his face must have stayed Davos’ frustration, if only for a moment, for his righteous anger seems to evaporate from him like mist in the dawn. Jon took a steadying breath, suddenly feeling ill and weak-limbed. “If I cannot hold her at arm’s length, my Lord, I may not survive it.”

Davos looked as if Jon had just delivered him a sound slap to the face. A stunned and heavy silence followed, before Davos cleared his throat uncomfortably. He bowed and headed to his quarters.

Jon watched him go, feeling only a strange relief at what he had just revealed, before taking up his quill again.

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Tyrion awoke that morning with a pulsing headache and a new proclivity for cursing at inanimate objects such as the sun and the well of ink that toppled off the edge of his desk as he stumbled to his washing basin.

As such, he was not altogether pleased when Missandei sent for him. Their Queen wished to see their visitors and Ser Jorah off.

He stood amid the wide tide line of the beach, having one last go at Jorah before the grumpy old bear left again after being so long away. He could not help feeling a bit of sadness at his departure. He had grown fond of the gruff company of the somber knight.

He had every intention to give his own farewell to the Lord Snow, but stopped short at the sight of Daenerys already with the man. Tyrion instead settled for watching, as he was so fond of doing.
On the surface, the interaction between the two was shallow and perfunctory at best. But he knew his Queen well, and so he knew better than to think that ‘I’ve grown used to him’ was nothing more than a platitude.

He stood with her, as she gazed silent and unmoving at the ship in the distance, as it lowered it’s sails and set its course into the sea. After it was nothing more than a mere smudge on the horizon, she turned and made her way back up to the castle, her bloodriders following closely behind.

He stayed for awhile yet. Pleading, to whoever may be listening, that those damned fools on that damned ship would return her, for his own sake at the very least.

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He was both shocked and thoroughly unsurprised when he answered the knock at his door to see the knight Jorah Mormont standing before him.

The man bowed. “My Lord, I hope I have not disturbed you.”

Jon tried very hard to not feel a bit exasperated at Mormont’s greeting, as well as his presumed request for his audience. He smiled tightly and stepped aside. “Of course not, Ser.”

Jorah’s returned smile failed to reach his eyes as he stepped into the cramped quarters, looking about. “I am no Ser,” he said frankly.

He knew little else about the exiled son of his old Lord Commander except what that very same man had told him. The fact that Longclaw, the legendary sword of Jorah’s house, currently resided at his hip suddenly struck him and he felt the weapon’s usually reassuring weight grow heavier. Jon’s traitorous mind also seemed fit to dredge up the images of the man’s embrace with the Queen upon his return, the kissing of her hands at his departure. He cleared his throat in attempt to stay the onslaught, now fairly miserable with himself. “What can I do for you, my Lord?”

Jorah turned around to face him, hands folded behind his back. “I am no lord either,” he said. Jon simply shifted, the tension ratcheting up to untold levels at this point. “I simply wanted to introduce myself, my Lord. I thought it wise to get to know each other better, now that we are bonded in a strange fellowship.”
Jon nodded. “Aye, I can only agree with that…” he trailed off lamely, not knowing how to address a man that served a Queen that claimed to be neither lord nor ser.

Jorah seemed not to notice as he stepped closer to him. “I suppose a congratulations are in order. For your recent coronation.”

Jon couldn't be sure, but a strange gleam came into the man’s eyes at this, as if he were one hair’s breadth away from challenging him to a duel. “I appreciate that, my Lord, but, as I’m sure you well know the North does not hold much on ceremony.”

The gleam extinguished from the man’s eyes and he nodded knowingly, a small, reminiscent smile playing on his lips. He turned away, wandering the small room aimlessly. “And how fares my lady sister?”

“She is very well. She and your house were instrumental in gaining Winterfell back from the Boltons.”

Jorah tilted his head knowingly at that. “I have not seen Lyanna since she was but a babe, but she is a Mormont through and through, I know that much.” He shook his head, wistful.

Jon managed a small smile at that and waved an arm to the table and chairs in the corner of the room. “Do you wish to sit, my Lord?”

The old knight seemed a bit surprised at this invitation, but sat gratefully. Jon poured them both a horn of ale. He was just about to apologize to the man for not being able to provide wine, which was a thoroughly Southern drink, but Jorah gulped it down greedily. Jorah looked up at him after he had drained his cup, bashful. “I've not had ale in years, my Lord, forgive me.”

Jon laughed at this, suddenly realizing how Northern this man really was, and how he had not see his homeland in many years. All past feelings of envy or suspicion wilted like the weak things they were in light of it. He took up the chair opposite him, sipping his own ale much more reservedly than his guest. He indicated the pewter flagon in the center of the table. “Please, help yourself.”

Jorah flashed him a knowing and grateful smile and did as he was bidden.
The men were silent for a time, Jon never being well practiced in the art of conversation, and neither, it seemed, was Jorah Mormont.

“I was saddened to hear of what happened to your lord father,” Jorah said eventually, breaking the silence.

Jon peered at him questioningly. “Was he not the one who sentenced you to death?”

Jorah heaved a great sigh, nodding gravely. “Aye, but he only acted truly. I deserved every day in exile for what I did.”

Jon felt oddly warmed to hear this man say such things. It was the genuine regret of a man coming to terms with his past transgressions. Jon couldn't begin to begrudge anyone for that. Jorah leaned back in his chair and looked at him. “Truth be told, your father did me a great service.” Jon raised his eyebrows at that, not able to fathom how a lifetime of exile could prove a service. “Without my time in Essos, I would have never have met Daenerys Targaryen.”

The brightness that shone from the man’s face at that moment made Jon feel itchy with something strange and formidable that he could not begin to put a name to. He realized, to his utter dismay, that what he was seeing in Jorah’s face was total adoration. “You see this as a worthy exchange?”

“Aye, my Lord.”

The man offered no further explanation and Jon suddenly felt he had no need for it. He knew, abrupt as a kick from a horse, that the man’s reasons would become clear to him in time. He cleared his throat, growing evermore restless. “And how did you find yourself in the service of a lost Targaryen Queen, my Lord?”

Jorah’s entire being seemed to sink at that, his face falling into deep furrows of shame and guilt.

“During my time in Essos, I came to be employed by the Baratheon regime to spy on the last of the Targaryens.”

Jon felt a cold shock seeping in from the tips of his fingers at this revelation. “You meant to conspire against her?”
Jorah nodded, looking as downtrodden as he had ever seen any man. “I was to be given a royal pardon, after my duty was done,” he said heavily, as if such a reward meant next to nothing now. Jorah placed his horn upon the table, suddenly losing interest in the long-missed drink. “They aimed to kill her. Once it was done, I would have been free to return to Westeros and… home,” he said hesitantly. “Though now I know that Bear Island is no longer my home. Or Mormont my house. I am nothing but a disgraced man trying to find some way to redeem myself of all my many failures.”

“And you seek this thing with the Queen of Dragons?”

“Aye, my Lord.” The older man folded his hands in his lap, lost in the pain of memory. “I do not claim to be a great man, but within my time serving her, it became harder to keep up my end of the bargain. I started feeding them false information. I even thwarted an assassination attempt.” He threw a hand up in a kind of helpless despair. “Even still, my secret became known and she banished me, when she should have killed me.” He sighed, running a rough palm over his brow and flashing him a cold, ironic smile. “A twice-exiled man. I wonder if anyone else in all the world can boast of such a feat.”

Jon felt an inexplicable pity for this man, realizing how heavy his regrets weighed, and how much he strove to reclaim some sense of honor in the wake of them. “I have never been officially exiled my Lord, but I have chosen banishment for myself as punishment for the crime of being born a bastard,” he said, leaning forward. “Only death is more painful.”

Jorah looked at him strangely, much like a man that had just discovered some precious thing that he had been searching for an age. The man gave him a small smile of gratitude. “We seem to have much and more in common, my Lord. Including the blessing of the Queen.”

“She is not my Queen,” Jon returned too quickly, his voice lacking the strength he had sought to inject within it.

Jorah raised his eyebrows at this. “Perhaps not this day, my Lord.”

A tense silence reigned for what to Jon felt like a lifetime. Jon did not entirely approve of the look Jorah was giving him at that moment, as if he held some secret that he would not share. Jon felt the wild need to press him further on the meaning of his words, but his mouth felt dry and his tongue heavy and clumsy.

“I know you must be tired, my Lord,” Jorah said, standing from his chair and offering a small bow. “I shall leave you to your duties. I thank you for your time.” With that, the man left through the
open door before Jon could even stand or speak.

Chapter End Notes

You guys are seriously just incredible. I am so overwhelmed by the response to this story. It's what motivates me!

I am aware of the episode leak, and I am still on the fence on watching it. If I do, I know that I'll be writing like crazy. I'll be sure to indicate spoilers if that ends up happening and going up before Sunday. I wouldn't get your hopes up though.

Let me know what you think.
He was so tired, so thoroughly beaten-- humbled beyond measure. He did not have the strength to fight it any further. The naked joy, the raw grief that he witnessed in her face as they spoke then, the dark tones of truth and promise he heard in her voice--they only served to weaken his faltering resolve.

Pledging fealty to her, in that dim and quiet chamber, was as easy a thing as blinking.

She did not know why she found the top of The Wall so comforting.

The constant wind blotted out all other sounds. Up here, she could barely hear the mournful cries of her two children, grieving the loss of their dear brother through the gale.

Safe and alone in her chamber upon their return, she had cried until her body ached, until her eyes had gone so dry she did not know if she would ever shed a tear again. Sleep had captured her completely then, to save herself from breaking her own bones against the planks, from flaying her own flesh with her very nails.

She had woke hours later, her face sore and swollen, listless and trapped in a dark lassitude.

“I’ve seen our King Snow return from worse, your Grace,” Davos had assured her kindly and unprompted when she had met him by chance in the hall. She had had every intention of apologizing to the man, of falling to her knees and begging forgiveness for not delivering his King back to him, but she had not. She had only looked at him and nodded, not noticing how sincere the assurance truly had been.

And now she looked upon the wide, white world below, looking nothing more than a spill of candle wax from this height. She felt small and diminished-- no more than a speck of bone and blood atop the edge of the world.

She had failed her child. The same child who would stay behind while his brothers hunted so that his mother may shower him with strokes and coos. The child that loved to sing, that loved to turn
and wheel in the air like a swallow. And she had betrayed him as good as plunging the spear into his neck with her own hand.

She had failed the King in the North. The King who had stepped away from certain safety to fight off the dead who would mean to do her and his men harm. The King who saw the heft of another lance intended for her and Drogon and had not once hesitated to see her fly off without him.

Towering above all these great follies, she had failed to see. Her lust for the throne, the natural suspicion she harbored and stoked of a rival monarch-- had blinded her to the truth and she had paid much too dear a price for such base instincts.

She was no worthy Queen. Not worthy for the adoration of her own subjects, nor the loyalty of those that loved the King.

Her cold, lonely vigil was as fair a punishment as she could conjure.

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By the time she had returned to the bottom of the Wall, Night’s Watch men were already swarming around the figure, pulling him off the exhausted horse, eager and worried and disbelieving. She could hear Davos cursing at them impatiently. “Back up I say! Damn the lot of you!”

She rushed through the grate of the lift before it was even fully open, her heart pounding with a reckless and savage hope that would surely snatch her up like a deadly undertow if proven false.

Jon Snow was held up between Davos at the arms and the redheaded Wildling at the legs. “Your King lives!” The redhead shouted and the crowd gathered about cried out in joy.

A relief so thorough and potent overcame her then she had to close her eyes, to remember to breath in and out, to keep her feet firmly rooted to the earth. When she opened them again, they were hauling him away into the bleak, drafty castle that was Eastwatch-By-The-Sea.

“To my chambers,” she found herself saying too loudly. “On the ship. The King in the North shall not be denied any comfort there.” She was stunned at how commanding her voice sounded although she felt as empty and ragged as an old waterskin.
The others looked at her, hesitating for only a moment before they made the way to the shore.

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She came forward slowly and settled herself in a chair next to the bed, tracing the jagged line above his heart again and again with her eyes.

“Ser Davos,” she said. The man stopped at the door, having turned to leave with only one sidelong glance her way, ensuring there was nothing more he could do for his King. She looked over her shoulder at him. “You spoke to me of Jon Snow taking a knife to the heart for his people.”

He looked dreadfully uncomfortable, his glance skittering from her to the man lying on the bed, evidence of this alleged ‘turn of phrase’ made flesh and blood for all to see. “Aye, your Grace, I did.”

“And this was a simple figure of speech, I suppose?”

Davos shook his head, searching the the planks beneath his boots for a moment before looking back up at her. “No, your Grace, I suppose it wasn’t.”

Dany licked her lips. “I do not appreciate being lied to, my Lord.”

Davos shook his head, wringing his hands nervously as he stepped forward. “No, your Grace, I suppose you wouldn’t.” He stopped and glanced at the man reposed on the bed. “I apologize, for the both of us... for misleading you.”

She turned back to face Jon Snow, her eyes falling upon the wound on his chest again as if pulled by a lodestone. “Your apology is accepted Ser Davos,” she said by way of dismissal.

The man nodded, hesitating, fidgety and tense. “If I may be so bold, your Grace...” She turned back towards him, giving him the permission he sought in his preamble. “But, uh, well... what you did for those men... for Jon Snow, it was very brave. And, well, I just wanted to thank you, your Grace, for saving the lives of men that were not your own. If not for you, I have no doubt they would have all perished... and our King with them. I cannot begin to convey my gratitude, I’m
afraid.”

Dany felt warm for the first time in a very long while. She offered Davos a small smile, an even smaller nod.

“And…” Davos began again, unsure. “I’m sorry, about your dragon, your Grace,” Davos said, his face looking all the world that this news had tore him up properly. “Really, I am.”

She thought, for an instant, that if she looked into the man’s eyes at that moment and glimpsed any hint of pity, she would be liable to lash out, to rage against such a petty, useless emotion.

But she only saw openness, raw sympathy -- as if he had known the loss of a child, that he was well aware of the exact nature of the acidic, black morass that poisoned her heart-- and it split her open like a bad stitch. She bit her lip hard and threw her glance downward. She felt a small warmth on her shoulder, a tiny squeeze of fingers. From any other soul, such a forward contact with her would be returned with a harsh rebuke, even a loss of a hand if she thought it warranted, but from Ser Davos, it proved to be the only comfort she could take until the man on the bed returned to her fully.

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She fled.

Like a blushing bride, like a green boy before battle, she fled from his chambers, barely managing to escape in time.

She pressed a cold palm to the wood of the door, sealing the other over her mouth so that her breath may stay in her lungs, so that she may carve little divots into the top of her index with her teeth.

She pushed away from the door, addled by what she had just seen in Jon Snow’s eyes-- the dark and immutable truth that unfurled like an ancient fern within the grip of his fingers.

She took in a great breath, trying to still the frisson in her blood, to throw off the heavy iron band that bound her chest as good as any vise.
The very same sentence she had chanted in her mind as she sped to Eastwatch, the clouds wetting her furs and the wind making her eyes stream, betrayed her now. She had repeated it for all those endless hours atop Drogon. She had treated it much like a talisman, and old and forgotten spell that would surely keep herself safe from the storm that would swallow her up if she proved to be too late.

The words seemed so absurd now, with what she now knew to be true. She barked out a small, cold laugh into the dawn-filled corridor, feeling just a bit unhinged, a paper kite lost in a thunderhead. How false those words now rang, such a paltry defense they now proved to be against the swirling tempest in her heart that she found her ironic laugh falling into a single, wretched sob.

She pressed a fist to her mouth and rushed to her own borrowed chamber, the fear and treacherous longing swiftly swamping what small strength she had left to her as sure as the tide. She found her mind chanting again, vainly trying to weave that protective ward, to lay foundation stones for a wall she was certain could never be stout enough in a world that held him in it.

I am not in love with Jon Snow.

+++ 

He had thought she wouldn't come.

He had become quite certain of it, in fact, towards the end when all looked sure to be lost. His sending Gendry was a move made out of endless desperation. He was King and he had lead his men to their almost certain death. When he looked back on it now, he had only wanted at least some comfort-- no matter how minuscule-- that he had done something, anything that may have saved them before the end.

The Queen and her dragons were their only hope, and it had been a wretched and paltry one. He had wished, with everything left to him, that she would come, but if she did not-- if she saw the endeavor as as hopeless as he felt, at the very least she would know.

If not for the island, the weak ice, they would have died before Gendry even made it to the Wall. If not for Beric’s flaming sword, they would have frozen to death in those two hard, dark nights caught in that scrap of stone that was their only salvation.
Two days of this may bring a man to do thoughtless things… like throwing stones in a fit of wild boredom and blind hatred.

Standing at the crest of the outcrop, he had watched as one of the men under his protection was pulled under a sea of dead, a mere arm’s length from his grasp. He had been stricken with such a sharp and cruel sadness that it had cut him off at the knees as good as any greatsword. He had looked around him, the chaos of his world muted, his vision sunken and tunneled in. He had watched as wave after wave of wights set upon his companions and for the first time in a very long while he felt utterly, bitterly weak. He had failed himself and his men, the North and Daenerys. He was no worthy King at all.

It had taken him all his will to raise his sword again, to rally the last of his faltering strength to delay the inevitable.

Before he had even brought the blade back down, a spray of impossible heat had washed over him and he fell back, astonished, as fire rained down upon their enemies. The doused ember of hope in his chest had reignited into an all consuming flame as he had looked up and saw her-- pale and strong and fierce. She had come for them, borne upon an impossible and precious thing, and had looked at him with the first hint of fear he had ever seen in her eyes as she reached for him.

He knew he loved her then. That very moment.

And the gravity of this revelation is what he had to wake up to, as his vision swam and blurred, coming into sharp and brilliant focus upon the white shadow of her seated beside his bed. He tried to take her in, attempted to heft the enormity the was her presence, but he could only stumble over the small breath that escaped her like the trapped thing it had been.

Guilt washed over him in a humid, stifling rush. It rose in his throat like bile as he remembered the fall of her dragon and the seismic pulse of anger that had cracked through him like a thunderbolt. He could not properly convey all these things clamoring within in him, so could only reach for her.

He was so tired, so thoroughly beaten-- humbled beyond measure. He did not have the strength to fight it any further. The naked joy, the raw grief that he witnessed in her face as they spoke then, the dark tones of truth and promise he heard in her voice-- they only served to weaken his faltering resolve.

Pledging fealty to her, in that dim and quiet chamber, was as easy a thing as blinking.
And as she left the room, strides and breaths too quick, he thought about how dangerous they could be for one another, if what he suspected proved true.

+++ 

Jon cracked his eyes open at the rap on the door, squinting against the bright, golden light that now flooded the chamber. He cast about for a confused moment, not knowing entirely where he was. He finally gathered his bearings enough to clear his throat and manage a scratchy “come in.”

“My Lord,” Ser Jorah said with a small bow.

“Ah, none of that Jorah.” He said tightly as he struggled to pull himself further up on the pillows. “If we can cross the Wall together, we can damn well call each other by our bloody names,” Jon considered for a moment how much Milk of the Poppy he had actually been given, but he was too tired to care. Too relieved to see his new-found friend safe and unhurt to worry about the uncouthness of a King (or otherwise) cursing.

And he needn’t have, because Jorah gave him a rare and real smile that reached his eyes this time. It warmed Jon to his very core.

“I just wanted to see how you were doing, my friend. We all feared the worst.”

Jon nodded. “Aye, I’m a hard bastard to kill.”

Jorah sat in the chair that had been occupied by the Queen just hours before. Or had it been days? “I brought you a gift,” he said, pulling out two horn cups and a flask. He set about pouring a cup for them both. “Although I can’t rightfully say that it’s measter’s orders…."

Jon couldn’t help but smile as he took the horn from Jorah and drank gratefully.

“The Queen tells me you intend to pledge fealty.”
He stopped at this, peering over at the other man who only looked back at him expectantly. He finally nodded, swirling his ale in an idle attempt to distract himself from the storm that suddenly surged up in his chest. “Aye, I do. I mean, I did.”

Jorah leaned forward, “I think it a wise choice.”

Jon shrugged, taking another swig of ale. “Not much of a choice, to be true.”

The man leaned back, appraising, giving him a knowing look that Jon did not know quite what to do with, so he busied himself with looking at the tepid foam floating on the top of his ale. “How do you mean there was not much of a choice?” Jorah asked. “I would find it hard to believe the Queen threatened you with dragon fire.”

Jon shook his head, his face darkening in thought. “Daenerys risked herself and her dragons for a band of fool men that would have meant next to nothing to her if they had died on that lake.” Jon looked at the old knight sitting beside him, a banked fire of love and pride licking its way from his belly and into his voice despite his best efforts to douse it. “She came for us, she came at the request of a fool of a King who had offered her no alliance or army. She saved us and a plot she had little love for. She is a true Queen and I am no King fit to defy her any longer.”

Jorah looked at him with what Jon could only identify as pride and he felt a deep blush creep into his face as he took an enthusiastic swig of his ale.

“She was sick with worry, our Queen.”

Jon found himself searching for some sort of answer in his impassive face, not sure why the man should tell him this. It only served to make him feel worse. “She refused to ride her dragons back to Dragonstone. She wanted to stay here, on the ship, to make certain that you would be alright.”

A sharp sting of guilt struck him at that– and something else that was more immovable and perilous than he could wield at that moment. “She needn’t have troubled herself in such a way.”

Jorah tilted his head, agreeing. “Aye, but often times the Queen loves too ardently for sense.”

He felt himself go oddly cold at his words, his limbs locking in a careful, dreadful hope. He darted his eyes to the man sat next to him, who only looked thoughtful and strangely… pleased.
“I have only seen her in such a way once before,” Jorah said with a heavy and sad sigh, “when her late lord husband Khal Drogo fell ill and eventually succumbed to death.” His eyes were far away, his face pained and tight, recalling a distant and terrible memory. “He and their child did not live out the day.”

Jon felt his throat close up at his words, his breath suddenly shallow, failing to fill his lungs as it should.

Jorah leaned further from his chair, his eyes forlorn and grateful all at once. “I have to thank you, Jon Snow, for not dying when others would. For not dying this day.” The man beside him seemed to be struggling with his composure, and likewise Jon felt as though he would simply fly right out of his skin.

“I cannot accept your thanks, Ser,” Jon managed, his voice sounding from far away. “Such choices are rarely of our own making.”

Jorah nodded. “All the same.” He stood, draining his ale. “From that day on, I wished to never see our Queen in such a way again.” He glanced down at his feet. “I saw that again, in these past days, but you came back to her in a way the Khal could not, and that is proof enough for my gratitude.”

With that and a shallow bow, the man set the flask upon Jon’s bedside table and left.

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Chapter End Notes

Send help.

Help can be sent in the form of general flailing or specific flailing @freshhexes on tumblr.
The Death of Duty

Chapter Summary

The resonance that passed between them then was as powerful as a storm gale, as tactile as the fur of his cloak. They simply knew each other then, bound by the ghosts that dwelt in their pasts, the fires that lived in their future.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

That night felt thick-- pulled taut with the knowledge that many among them would depart Dragonstone and never return. A haphazard feast was thrown by the Queen, to cheer the spirits of her people before riding into climes that would be wholly foreign and strange to them in almost every aspect. He thought of this as he filtered through the makeshift banks of tables spread upon the lawns outside the castle. Dothraki drummers beat a raucous melody above the general clamor of men feasting before battle. As he walked, he noticed some of them lifting horns or cups as he approached, others giving him nods. He attempted to acknowledge them all, feeling something peculiar and leaden settle in his chest at their familiarity.

He saw her pale yellow hair, sticking head-and-shoulders above most everyone surrounding her. Pod, as ever, was seated at her side. “Lady Brienne,” he greeted as he took up the spot on the bench next to her. She bowed her head, hastily wiping her hands on her breeches, greasy from the roast chicken she was enjoying. “Your Grace.”

“I was surprised to see you in King’s Landing.”

She nodded, looking worried that perhaps her King did not approve. “Your lady sister sent me in her stead.”

Jon smiled at that, laughing softly. “Always knew she was smarter than me.”

Brienne grinned in tacit agreement before her face pulled into something dark and troubled. “I do fear for her safety, your Grace.”

Jon nodded, leaning forward to grab a nearly emptied flask of watered-down wine. “Aye, I do as well. As long as Littlefinger is near her I will never be at ease.”
Brienne nodded. “He is not to be trusted, but I am comforted in knowing that the Lady Arya is there with her.”

Jon looked up at her at this, his heart leaping. “I cannot wait to see her again. The news that she was alive and in Winterfell was the happiest I have received since you returned my sister to me at Castle Black. How is she? Was she well when you left her?”

Brienne glanced away, thoughtful and unsure. “All I can say is that I do not think you need to worry about your youngest sister, your Grace.”

Jon gave her a curious look, but the woman offered no further explanation. Instead she sighed, draining the last of whatever was left in her cup. “Being sworn shield to your sisters has been the greatest honor of my life, your Grace. Seeing them safe, knowing that they are together in their home again bring me much joy.” She glaced at him, a bit uneasy, a bit sad. “But I fear they are in need of me no longer.”

Jon shook his head, offering her what he hoped was a reassuring smile. “My lady sisters will always need someone to protect them, especially when I cannot be there to do it.”

Brienne looked thoroughly unconvinced. “I am not so sure. Lady Arya is formidable, your Grace. As long as she is with Lady Sansa, there is no need for me.”

Jon spun his horn of wine upon the table idly, considering. “I do not hold to the traditions of the crown,” he said, leaning back to look at her. “Hands and Kingsgaurds and all that. The pageantry of King’s Landing does not do well within the halls of Winterfell. But, if my sisters wish to dismiss you of your oath, I would be honored to name you a member of my Kingsgaurd, Lady Brienne.” He tilted his cup at her, flashing an ironic smile. “For however long that lasts, at any rate.”

The woman blinked at him, looking slack with shock and pale as a ghost. “You honor me too much, your Grace. I could not be more unworthy.”

Jon barked a laugh. “What a pair you and I make, Lady Brienne.” He stood from the table, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Think it over. We can speak further in Winterfell.”

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He never much liked sailing.

Ships were too often crowded, musty and dank with the salt of the sea and the sweat of sailors. The frail fate of a ship caught in a storm never sat well with him, either. A horse could be made to stop, to find shelter and safe haven from lashing winds, but a ship was woefully at the mercy of a notoriously merciless nature.

When the weather was fine and bright, however, and the wind bracing and cool, he could not deny why some found it so diverting. After an endeavor as fraught and perilous as the Dragon Pit meeting and the harried days of planning and preparing that followed, the crisp air felt like a healing salve.

Which is perhaps why he found her standing at the rails, arms spread before her as she took in the long line of the ocean, the spill of clouds red as wine over the sun. He thought he would never see a sight so lovely.

He joined her as the wind whipped her hair to and fro like kelp caught in a current.

“I’ve always enjoyed sailing,” she said without preamble.

“I’m afraid I cannot say the same, your Grace.”

She looked over at him, a teasing smile spreading over her face. “I thought the King of the North to be impervious to fear.”

He barked a laugh, feeling a blush seep into his cheeks. “All men fear something, your Grace.”

Her smile broadened into something real and blazing that he could not fully take in. “It is a steadfast ship, I assure you, Lord Snow.”

He nodded. “I have no doubt in that, your Grace, though I cannot imagine that sailing, even on a stout of a ship as this, is finer than flying.”
She looked away, her face so open and so very at ease. “I cannot deny that nothing can really compare to the thrill of flying, my Lord, but it is a lonely affair.”

Jon felt something jolt him from the soles of his feet, something that had him reaching for the rail in front of him to steady himself. She looked at him with the ghost of a secret and knowing smile. He returned it fully, helpless.

They lapsed into a happy silence, reveling in one another, glad of the respite, grateful for the quiet. Most everyone was below decks, preparing for their nightly duties or else eating supper. Solitude was a luxury to be relished in the rare times it was presented.

“I can’t help but feel nervous,” she said finally as she looked over at him, eyes worried and mouth downturned. “About my reception at Winterfell.”

Jon shook his head, taken by her show of insecurity. “I cannot blame you in that, your Grace, but I should think that my sisters and brother would receive you well, at least. The Northern Lords are a different matter to be sure, and for them I can make no promises.”

Dany tilted her head, intrigued. “You must be excited to see your family again.”

Jon felt himself warm at the thought. He could almost see Arya’s delighted face-- even the thought of Sansa’s dogged exasperation made him smile. “Aye, your Grace. I cannot say how much.”

She smiled, clasping her hands and leaning her forearms upon the rail before her. “I look forward to meeting them.” She brought her eyes to his, slowly, as if reluctant to reveal what she held within them-- a deep, almost elemental sadness. He took a step forward, desperate to do anything to extinguish such pain from her as good as an elixir. “I do not know what it is like... to have a family,” she said slowly, her face shuttered and cold. “My brother was the only family I ever knew, and he was cruel beyond measure. Your sisters are fortunate, to have been granted such a man to be their brother.”

Jon felt his heart simply break for her, again and again. He tore his eyes away, a weak attempt at stifling the overwhelming desire to wrap her up in him, to shelter her like a ward. “My brother wanted nothing more than to sit the Iron Throne. To restore our family’s house to former glory. And he used me as a bargaining chip to do just that.”

He barely managed it, but he spoke. “It is by good fortune then, that he did not possess your same
determination.”

She smiled, a bit cold, a bit ironic. “He sold me, like cattle, so that he may be granted an army.” She shook her head, a bitter crease to her brow. “No, I have never been fortunate enough to know of family.”

He could not think of anything to say to that. He was not an articulate man by nature and words proved too frail to carry the weight of what he wanted to tell her. “The dragons are the only family I will ever know. And I could not protect them.”

“Aye,” he replied, taking a heavy step toward her, face downturned. “I could not protect my sisters from horrors I could never imagine. I could not protect my brother from being slain at his own wedding feast. I cannot begin to know what it feels to lose a child, but I can tell you that I have known the hopeless rage that comes over a person when they fail to protect those they love.” The resonance that passed between them then was as powerful as a storm gale, as tactile as the fur of his cloak. They simply knew each other then, bound by the ghosts that dwelt in their pasts, the fires that lived in their future.

She took a great and shuddering breath, seeming to take in the power of the sea before her, the heat of the sun sinking behind her shoulder as she stood straighter. He looked on, awed by the blaze in her eyes, the warmth of her that he could almost see simmering under her skin like magma. He found himself taking another step forward, too close for simple friendliness now. “We will avenge those we’ve lost, your Grace. By my hand or yours. You have my word.”

The space between them crackled with a primal and fierce energy, like the spark off an anvil. The way she looked at him now-- hungry and determined-- there was nothing left for him to doubt. She wanted him, and since pledging himself to her only a fortnight ago, he could deny her nothing.

So it was all he could to drop his mouth to her own, to express the sincerity of his vow to her when words proved too small. Wild and all too brief, he kissed her as if he had lost the ability to breathe, seeking salvation in the space between her lips.

And-- gods-- she kissed him back and he almost cried out with how good it felt. Her eyes were dark and shining all at once as they broke away, slow and unsure like the parting of a cloud. She wrapped a hand around his wrist and the heat of her through the leather of his glove was near scalding. “Will you come to me tonight, Jon Snow?”

His name sounded like a spell in her mouth and he was helpless against it. He nodded against her brow and breathed a yes that was as weak and hopeless as he felt.
She pressed her nails into his wrist painfully hard, sending him careening back to earth. He pulled away, never looking back as he fled to his chamber.

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“You think it love?” Varys questioned, idly shifting a Stark direwolf from one end of The Wall to the other on the map before him.

Tyrion sighed heavily, turning to fetch the wine from the opposite wall. “I am afraid so.”

He heard Varys walk slowly towards him as he took two long pulls from his glass. “And this troubles you?”

Tyrion poured more for himself. He was going to need it, he knew. “I took you for a shrewd man, my Lord,” he quipped as he turned around.

Varys looked thoroughly unperturbed at this rebuke. “You know, wine is not good for sea sickness.”

Tyrion took another large swig as he sat heavily in a nearby chair. “So is unappetizing conversation.”

Varys smiled thinly at that. “So the Queen of Dragons and the King in the North are in love and laying together,” he said mildly, tucking his hands into his sleeves. “They join forces not only for great power, but for great joy as well. And this is an unfortunate state of affairs?”

Tyrion shook his head, endlessly impatient and now wondering why he had called the man from his chamber. “Have you forgotten what love does to people?” He asked as he placed his glass down heavily on the parchment-strewn table. “Forgive me, Lord Varys, but you may not be the best judge in this matter.”

Varys nodded, taking up the chair opposite him. He leaned back, hands on his belly, looking thoughtful and wholly unruffled. “Love is a strange emotion to me, my Lord. But I do know that Robert’s Rebellion was sparked from the flame of love.”
Tyrion rubbed a irritated hand over his brow. “And my sibling’s love for each other installed bastards on the Iron Throne and caused a war that has seen countless deaths and despair.” Varys raised his eyebrows, as if agreeing with his assessment of the weather. The man’s mild demeanor only served to darken Tyrion’s mood. “You still see no problem with this?” He asked darkly.

Varys looked away, his expression slightly wistful. “It is a belief of mine that desire is the seed of all strife in the world, my Lord, but love is capable of many great things, as it is capable of the terrible. Love is a power as fundamental to us lowly men as the sea is to a fish. And a love thwarted is a horrible thing to behold.”

Tyrion shifted uncomfortably. “I do not mean to thwart such affections between them, my Lord, but we are in the midst of a war and--”

“Love saved Daenerys Targaryen,” Varys interrupted. “Love saved Jon Snow from growing up a fatherless child who would have amounted to no more than a stable boy.”

Tyrion nodded in reluctant ascension. “Yes, but what does this have to do with what we speak? Please, do enlighten me, my Lord, I grow tired of your japes.”

Varys leaned back in his chair, a knowing smirk on his face. “Do you hold to prophecies, my Lord?”

Tyrion looked at him darkly, taking another earnest swig of his wine. “Do you know me to be a fool, my Lord, or a Hand to the Queen?”

“The Lady Melisandre would not tell me the whole of it, but she did tell me that her purpose at Dragonstone was to ‘bring ice and fire together’.” The man shrugged. “The way she said it, I could only assume she was referring to something much deeper and mystical than that.”

Tyrion looked at him, astounded. “You mean to tell me you believe some witch from Essos and a fool tale of fate?” He waved a hand at him. “You haven’t been drinking sea water have you, my Lord?”

Varys shook his head slowly. “Do you know how I came to be where I am today? How an orphan boy from Lys found his way to King’s Landing only then to be at the side of the last Targaryen?” He looked at him then, his face dark and serious. “I consider all possibilities. And if what I suspect
of Lady Melisandre holds true, you will have wished you had done the same, my Lord Hand.”

Tyrion fidgeted under the other man’s gaze. He had always enjoyed Varys’ company as much as he was unsettled by him at times. “So this priestess spoke of Jon Snow and our Queen as if it was fate?” Varys only blinked back at him, not feeling this question warranted an answer. “How does this fix this problem? How can love not cloud one’s judgement or bring someone, no matter how great, out of their senses?”

“We have not seen any evidence of that.”

“Evidence?” Tyrion repeated, incredulous, “You believe this Red Woman and her wet nurse tales and yet now you speak of evidence?” He shook his head, angry and wholly exasperated that his audience with Varys had not proved as fruitful as he had hoped. “Our Queen flew all her dragons to save a few fool men because her love for the Lord Snow blinded her to sense. What more evidence are you in need of?”

Varys stood, his eyes lit with a blazing confidence that Tyrion desperately envied. “Our Queen will be revered by the men of the Night’s Watch and even the Wildlings for her bravery, for delivering their King to them. That is a good portion of the North that she so desperately needs at her side.” The man shifted, tucking his hands into his sleeves once more. “Our Queen saved Jon Snow. She saved Ser Jorah Mormont. She will be fiercely protected by two men who would rather walk into the sea than witness any harm befall her and you call this madness?” Varys tucked his hands into his sleeves, sighing and looking immensely disappointed as he looked down at him. “I had not expected you to be so short-sighted, my Lord Hand. I can only hope that you are granted some clarity in this matter in the future.” With a shallow bow, the man swept from the room.

Tyrion remained in the dim chamber until the lanterns hissed out their deaths, one by one.

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Fear was not an emotion she was familiar with.

It did not become her, the Queen of Dragons, to fear while laid with a man, in the safety of her own chamber as the sea rocked them gentle as babes.

She lay in her rumpled bed, sated and blissful, yet the fear found its way in, worming in like a weevil, clinging to her every nerve. “Why did we do this?” She whispered into the dark.
The fingers that idly carded through her hair stilled. He was silent for a long while, and she felt the heart under her ear kick into a new pace in the wake of her words.

“For reasons we cannot hope to resist,” he finally answered. “Or, at least I cannot,” he added, his voice cracking like a dying ember, his muscles tensing beneath her like a rope at its breaking point.

She closed her eyes, damning him again and again. Damning his splendidness, his honor, his over-full heart.

She turned her face toward him and his shadowed eyes held all the same fear that stormed in her now, yet he remained, as she knew he always would. She lifted a hand, pressing a shaking palm to his temple, mirroring what he had done just moments before-- when his eyes had laid bare everything she had sought to know in the heat of their embrace. “I fear I cannot either,” she confessed, her voice a weak and dismal thing compared to what her words held within them.

He smiled, sweet and sad. “What now?” he asked as he tucked a stray hair behind her ear.

She found herself smiling back, the fear driven from her like the frail ghost it was. “We’re fucked.”

He laughed and it was so foreign an expression that she could not help but fall into it with him.

As their laughs slowed and she laid her head upon him again, she ran an idle finger over a ridge of red and puckered skin. She felt him take in a sharp breath at her touch. “What happened to you?” she asked quietly.

“Mutiny,” he supplied, his voice cold and clipped. “My men were not happy about my decision to let Wildlings south of The Wall.”

She lifted herself up, looking at him properly. “I am no measter, but I am certain no man could survive wounds such as these.”

His face darkened, brow falling into a troubled ridge as he looked away from her. “Aye,” he said, “Not even me.”
She was silent for a long time, letting the words sink into her like the venom they were. “How?”

He looked back at her, his expression one of the lost and unmoored, not knowing where to safely tread. “The Red Woman, Melisandre, she and her Lord of Light brought me back.”

She found herself shaking, reaching out a hand to place it over where his heart thudded like a trapped animal against his ribcage. “For what purpose, I cannot begin to know,” he continued, wrapping a calloused palm around her wrist, stroking a thumb over the bones of her fingers. “But I am here.”

“And I am glad of it,” she said, hopelessly, tears caught in her lashes like dew.

His hand was suddenly tangled in her hair, pulling her to him so that he may drink from her mouth like a man seeing a spring after miles of desert.

Tomorrow they would wake up to face the strife of their world, but tomorrow had never been further away.

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“I've sent a raven to Lord Manderly, your Grace. He will receive us next evening and we shall depart the following morning at dawn, with most of Manderly and their bannermen’s forces,” Davos explained, drawing a line with his finger from the city of White Harbor to Winterfell on the map before him.

“And what of the roads?”

“They will not be kind, your Grace. Winter has come, so we can only hope that the storms are few and brief,” Jon answered her.

“That would mean slow going,” she replied.
Jon nodded. “Aye, storms could put us off a week or more.”

“I would suggest The King in the North rides with his armies,” Tyrion said. “The Queen may ride ahead with her bloodriders and Ser Jorah.”

Dany looked at her Hand, perplexed. “And arrive days before Lord Snow at the seat of his realm? Was arriving together not the point of me sailing instead of flying?”

He heard Jon shift uneasily across from her. Tyrion’s returned gaze held something black and bitter that she could not begin to understand. “It would serve you better, my Queen. The sooner in Winterfell the safer you’ll be. And the Lord Snow must lead the men he would ask to die for him.”

“And me,” she returned. “They also die for me. How can I ask the same if I do not march alongside them?”

“Alongside them or the Lord Snow?” He replied darkly.

A heavy silence fell over the room, the only sounds being the soft creak of timber and rope. She stood herself straighter, folding her hands in front of her. “Leave us.” There was a maddening moment of hesitation from all present. “I said leave us.”

The tone in her voice could not be mistaken and the others made for a hasty exit, Jon being the last out, throwing her a worried glance before closing the door.

She walked to the small window, looking out and allowing the silence to stretch uncomfortably. Finally, she turned around to face her Hand, still standing by the table where she had left him, looking miserable and mutinous. “What do you think you are doing?”

Tyrion shook his head, tapping a finger upon the table. “I saw the Lord Snow enter your chamber last night your Grace,” he said heavily. “And I know that it was not to discuss war strategy.”

She stepped closer to him slowly. “Oh? And how can you be so sure?”

“I did not eaves drop, your Grace, if that’s what you mean. But you cannot convince me
otherwise.” He glanced up at her, his eyes showing no small amount of shame. “I know you well, and you are no proficient liar.”

She came to stand beside him. “And this is why you contradict me so in front of my council?”

Tyrion shook his head once, looking pained. “I should not have done that, your Grace, and I am sorry for it.”

She simply looked at him, waiting patiently for his explanation. He sighed, defeated. “I know of love, your Grace. It is a rare and wonderful thing, to be sure, but it is also corrosive to sound decisions, contradictory to hard truths, and… well I cannot abide the thought of you destroying yourself and everything we have worked for on account of an emotion as fool and reckless as what love can be.”

Her cold resolve softened, her shoulders falling. She knew her Hand spoke truly. It was this very same truth she had blindly beaten back the previous night, not ready to look it in the eyes. “I did not wish this, my Lord,” she said quietly, “And just as I did not wish it upon me, I cannot wish it away from me.”

Tyrion smiled sadly at her. “Love is never granted, my Queen, only earned.”

Her heart hung heavy in her chest as she looked at him, pleading. “So what am I to do? How would my Lord Hand advise me in this matter?”

“Matters of the heart are resistant to advice, your Grace.” He said, dejected and defeated.

She sank down into a nearby chair, feeling weak and rudderless. She reached for a Manderly merman, tapping it upon the parchment in a fit of restlessness. “It is fortunate, I suppose, that I have such a Hand that would venture into such dangerous waters to see me safe, to make sure I do not lose my head.”

A small, proud smile lighted his face, if only for a moment. “That is my only goal, my Queen.”

She leaned forward. “You think it so certain, then, that what lies between me and Jon Snow is treacherous?”
Tyrion looked at her, his eyes aggrieved. “I am rarely ever certain, your Grace, but I have seen enough indication to cause me to worry.”

Dany raised her eyebrows at this. “Indication?”

“Your quest beyond The Wall, your Grace. Your choice to be on this ship rather than atop a dragon. His declaration that nearly sent the negotiations crashing down around our heads.”

“I think it would do poorly for me to land in Winterfell without the protection and vouching of the North’s King atop a creature such as a dragon. They already see me as an invader, my Lord. Jon Snow gave sound advice. I find it offensive that you are to think I chose this simply to be nearer to him.”

Tyrion nodded. “I agree, your Grace, it is the right thing to do, but what will happen when your desires and your duties do not so easily mingle?”

She stopped short at that, a hot blaze of outrage coursing through her. “My duty is paramount, my Lord.”

Tyrion nodded but still looked thoroughly unconvinced. “There is an old saying… love is the death of duty.” He stepped towards her, wringing his hands. “The truth of this is written in every drop of blood spilled on a battlefield, your Grace.”

“Do you not think duty also spills this blood, my Lord?” She said, her voice honed to a dangerous edge. “Do you think it love or duty that brings boys to battlefields? You think it love that killed my family? That drove my brother to sell me like I was no more than an unwanted chair?”

Tyrion looked at her sadly, despair soaking into his very being. “I only want you to be cautious, your Grace.”

She shook her head, faintly astounded at his tenderness, but still angry all the same. “I fear that you think that I aim to be careless with this man. That I take this too lightly. Let me make it plain to you, my Lord Hand, that this could not be further from the truth. I am well and painfully aware of the danger we have put ourselves in, doing this stupid thing.” She took in a shaky breath, angry at the tears that burned in her eyes. “But I cannot give you what you seek, I cannot comfort you by making a promise I have no hope of keeping. I can only ask that you may find some solace in that I
will always look to you for guidance, though I may be only a fool in love with another.”

Tyrion swiped a hand under his eye hastily, as if he could hide his tear from her and she smiled at him despite herself. He nodded and shifted on his feet in front of her, swallowing back whatever gripped him then. “I am…” he stopped again, closing his eyes. “I am happy for you, your Grace, truly. I shouldn’t think that any man alive could hope to deserve you, but by the Gods, Jon Snow just might.” He said breathlessly with a bright and loving smile.

She stood from her chair and stepped closer to him. “I will follow your advice, Lord Tyrion. I will ride ahead of the armies and the Lord Snow. Though, since you will be riding with me, I find it prudent for you to know that I shall make dismal company.” She held out her hand and Tyrion placed his own upon her open palm. She placed her other hand over it, pressing. “Thank you, my Lord.”

Tyrion looked up at her, gratitude shining in his eyes, and nodded.

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“I do not like it,” he said, standing in her chamber, looking worrisome and somber. “I cannot say that I am pleased to be parted from you,” he continued his voice rough with pain, casting his eyes down in shame.

She stood from her chair, stepping closer to him. She wanted nothing more than to tug at his cloak, to be careless and free, to tease a smile from his face, but her conversation with Tyrion still sat fresh and rank within her mind. “It is the best thing for you and I,” she said. “It is not safe for me in the North.”

“Aye, which is why I should be with you,” he said, his voice pitched low and rough. She could scarcely withstand the heady rush of want that crashed into her like rockslide.

She steadied herself, taking a small step back. “No harm will come to me, my Lord, while my bloodriders and Ser Jorah draw breath.”

He sighed, discontent soaking his every movement, but nodded.

She stepped forward again. “If we are to rule, you would do well to acclimate yourself to the
thought of being apart at times.”

He leaned back, looking at her as if she had just struck him across the cheek. “If we are to rule?”

She felt a thrill of shock pulse through her like a plucked bowstring. She had not meant… or did she? The thought firmly rooted itself in her mind like a new and stubborn sapling. She formed countless justifications, ample retractions of her slip in diction, but they all died on her tongue in the light of the undeniable truth-- what a fearsome thing they would be, ruling side by side.

The way he looked at her now made her think of a man clinging to a splintered scrap of deck in a storm-tossed ocean, watching his salvation sail in the other direction. She took a long and steadying breath, willing herself to walk away from him, to take herself from him and all he meant. “I haven’t thought of it before,” she said somewhat surprised. “But, It would be best for the realm, I think.” Her voice sounded weak and strange, over-eager and reaching. “But.. I must be certain that you are aware of my… that I am unable to produce an heir of your blood.” Her words were rushed, harried. She looked down at her hands, her composure swiftly deteriorating, every thread in her body stretching to the snapping point. “But such a union would be a great boon to the efforts in fighting what’s beyond the Wall and I suspect that the northern lords would be much more willing--”

“Please, your Grace,” Jon interrupted breathlessly, unable to withstand it any longer. “I am in no need of convincing.”

Her lungs emptied like a bellows as she turned around to stand before him fully. Something in her face must have spoken for her, because he smiled, small and secret and adoring. “I can’t have been so mysterious in my feelings for you that you should doubt me in such a way,”

She smiled back, utterly hopeless against the glad tears that threatened. “No, my Lord, you are no master in the art of guile.”

He strode forward and she felt like she would simply fly apart if he did not use his hands to hold her together, but to her dismay he stopped only a few steps away from her, his eyes worried and troubled. “I can’t hope to deserve this.”

She shook her head, barking a laugh. “You are a maddening creature, Jon Snow.”

A small, rueful smile formed on his lips. “You’re not the first woman to tell me this.”
She lifted her chin, defiant. “I have no doubt, but I would aim to be the last.”

Both of their resolves broke, tumbling down as good as felled timber. They closed the space between them, yearning for nothing more than eliminate it completely.

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Chapter End Notes

AND OFF WE GO.

(And seriously you guys, I am beyond humbled by the response to this. It is overwhelming.)
Many Meetings

Chapter Summary

Arya knocked upon the door with only a second’s hesitation. Why should she fear the Dragon Queen? For all her titles and repute, she was but a woman in a strange place with few friends to comfort her.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Receiving a Queen was not something that Sansa Stark was well-versed in.

As she ordered porters and directed scullery maids, she couldn’t help but recall the last time Winterfell had welcomed a Queen into its halls.

But this time Jon brings her here, with his vote of confidence. The words fell brittle as charcoal upon the hard, dark thing that grew within her. Ned Stark brought in his friend whom he loved and it meant the downfall of his house.

She tried to bring these black thoughts to heel, to bridle them like a feral stallion, but like so many wild and raving beasts, none could be truly tamed until they were properly gelded. Until she stood before the Dragon Queen and drank her in like sipping a wine she suspected poisoned, she would not truly be restful.

The raven from White Harbor had come the previous night: the Dragon Queen would be arriving with her party at least four days before that of her brother and the armies he led.

Troubled and fraught, she found Arya in the yard, putting the Master of Arms in his place for probably the third time that day. Noticing her elder sister, Arya sheathed her sword and bowed to her partner, who looked none too relieved to be dismissed of his duties.

“You must be getting bored,” Sansa said by way of greeting as her sister walked towards her.

“I can’t argue that,” Arya returned with a sigh. “It will be nice for Lady Brienne to return. And
Sansa smiled as they turned to walk together. “Jon would never fight you, even in a practice spar.”

“I think you know I can be rather convincing,” Arya replied with a sly grin as they settled on the end of an empty horse cart nearby. “I can't wait to see him.”

“Nor I,” Sansa said, acerbic. “But he will not be arriving with the Queen.”

Arya looked just as displeased at this news as Sansa had felt when learning of it the night before. “That is… disappointing.”

Sansa nodded, looking at her gloved hands. “I do wonder what she's like, though. I’m… nervous about meeting her.”

Arya kicked up a booted foot on the edge of the cart, squinting about the muddy yard. “I'm sure she is too. She's a southerner, after all. If she's not fearful she’s a fool.” She looked back at her, contemplative. “I don't think Jon would bend the knee to a fool,” she added quietly. Sansa did not know how to respond to this. She had never considered that the fearsome Dragon Queen she had only heard rumor of could possibly be just as anxious as herself.

“Dragons, though,” Arya said with an excited smile. “I can't believe I am to see dragons.”

Sansa smiled. “You were always more taken with the tales of them than I ever was.”

Her sister shrugged. “We never had much in common.”

She laughed quietly at that, pausing for a moment as she picked at a stray thread on her cloak to consider how she would say what she wanted next. “Littlefinger said to me… just before he died— he thought a marriage between the Queen and Jon would be quite formidable.”

Arya looked down at her boots, considering. “I guess it does make sense,” she said, a bit sad. “I don't think anyone deserves our brother, though.”
"In that we can agree, sister," Sansa returned with a tight grin. She glanced down at her gloves, the full weight of the anxiety that had plagued her for days crowding in around her like hungry vultures. "Do you think we can trust her?"

Arya considered this for a prolonged moment. "I don’t trust her, because I do not know her.” She looked up at her, eyes earnest and open. "But if there is anyone I can trust, it’s Jon. It’s family. Jon would not send a beast to us."

"Father trusted his best friend, and look at what came of it," Sansa returned, a bit petulant, a bit angry.

Arya blinked at her, stunned. "Jon is not father. And besides, father did nothing wrong."

"Jon is father. He is more like father than you, me, or Bran. The only one who was more like him was Robb, and following in father’s footsteps means your head on a spike.” She felt the insistent prickle of tears behind her eyes, her grip on the world loosening as if she were dangling from a cliff.

Arya reached out to her, squeezing her fingers around her forearm, looking away. “When I was in Braavos, I heard urchins and street vendors talk of the Dragon Queen of Meereen. Of how she killed the Grand Masters of Slaver’s Bay and gave hope to people who had been long forgotten by the world.” Her sister sighed, dropping her hand away and looking at her sadly. “I do not know this Daenerys Targaryen and so I cannot trust her, but someone who frees slaves and kills their masters cannot be a Cersei Lannister.”

Sansa glanced at Arya, presently looking very serene and untroubled. She couldn’t help but take some small comfort in her sister’s words. She had known little and less about Daenerys before, but now her seething anger and dogged worry quieted as she considered her sister’s words. Jon may be every inch the man Ned Stark had been, but perhaps he had placed his trust in someone deserving of it this time. Afterall, he had placed all of it in her when he left for Dragonstone, and she had strived every day to be worthy of it. Jon did have that effect on people, after all.

They sat in amiable silence as Sansa turned her mind to more menial things like how many candlesticks still needed to be made and how many furs needed tending to. *Everything will be alright. If nothing else, trust in Jon. Trust in your brother.*

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The sky stretched slate gray and featureless like a vast tundra above them. The pale spires of White Harbor loomed over her as men shouted and horses whickered nervously. Her boots crunched into the frosty grass as she made her way to her little mare. “Fast one, she is. And a tough one to boot. She’ll get you there safe and sound, your Grace.” Lord Manderly had said to her kindly when presenting it to her a few hours before. She was no Silver, but she was beautiful-- a dapple blue roan with large, black eyes.

She pulled on her gloves and rolled the cloak about her shoulders, anxiety firmly setting in. She swung herself up in the saddle, feeling, for the first time in days, a bit more at home as she did so. She had spent years looking at world from the back of a horse and it had been an age, it seemed, since last she rode. It was strangely comforting.

She drew the hood of her plain, furred cloak up and over the damning white crown of her hair. Missandei had spent an hour on it this morning, pinning and pulling and twisting until she was satisfied that it could be sufficiently hidden within the folds of a cloak. She looked down at her hands-- shaking only a little. She wore a dusty-gray, fur-lined dress, borrowed from a maid of Lady Manderly. She looked like any ordinary girl of the North and she could not help feeling a bit odd, a bit alien. She was Daenerys Targaryen, the last of her name-- she was not built for anonymity.

“Comfortable?” Tyrion inquired as he drew up next to her atop his pony. “I think the dress fits you nicely.”

She looked over at him, noticing his only attempt at disguise being the ill-fitting black cloak he sported. “I cannot help but think, my Lord, that all of this precaution is a bit ridiculous. I may cloak my hair and tell Drogon to fly above the clouds, but my bloodriders are difficult to hide, as are you.”

As if to illustrate her point, Kovarro and the others arrived noisily, looking more murderous than usual. All sported long, woolen capes, but their braids hung heavy and obvious as a torch over their shoulders. She looked back to Tyrion, brows raised in small triumph.

Tyrion looked back at her, nonplussed. “If we are separated, my Queen, and you find yourself alone with no protection, your only hope is to not be noticeable.”

Dany turned her eyes away, defeated in the face of her Hand’s logic.

She stroked the gray mare that she had been granted with, suddenly needing to distract herself from
the bustle and clamor around her-- the dark weight that clung to her heart as good as a barnacle to
the prow of a ship. Above her, Drogon and Rhaegal turned restlessly in the air, calling out to each
other as if in question.

In addition to and her bloodriders, Jorah, Varys, and Davos would make up her little company. “I
am no warrior, your Grace,” Davos had explained as they drew into dock that previous evening. “I
cannot offer you protection in such a way, but there are other ways to guard than with sword and
spear.” She could not help but feel relieved, knowing just how staunchly the man had vouched for
his King. It would do her well to have him by her side while faced with the prickly Northern lords.
Missandei, to her dismay, was to ride with The Unsullied and Grey Worm in her stead-- an
arrangement that the woman had tried not to look too pleased with when she heard of it. With only
a dozen in their number and two pack horses, they could ride hard and fast up the King’s Road.
Barring inclement weather, Jon had told her they could be there in two days.

Darkness flooded her heart as she thought of him-- the way he had bent his head close to her with a
worried brow and recounted the plan to her, for probably the fourth time in as many days: how fast
to ride, how much ground to cover in how long, what places to avoid and where to rest. He had
insisted that she repeat it back to him, and had stopped her with a nervous shake of his head when
she had missed a step in her recitation, launching to the plan again from the beginning.

She had felt so thoroughly assured, although her ire had been crawling ever higher as he kept on in
his onslaught, of his deep affection and concern for her writ large in his neuroticism. But it also
spoke loudly of how thoroughly he knew his country, how deeply it was etched into his very flesh.
In his exhaustive efforts to prepare her, he had told her everything he could articulate about his
family, about the castle he called home, eyes lit by longing and love. “I should warn you,” he had
said, looking rumpled and weary in the predawn darkness as they stood at the gates just hours ago.
“There is a Direwolf there. His name is Ghost. He is my companion. He is… well he’s protective
of me and my family, but you mustn’t be afraid of him. He knows people. He sees more than just a
common hound. He loves and protects those…” he had trailed off, looking deeply troubled,
blushing to the roots of his hair, as if he had just stumbled headlong into a room containing two
lovers locked in a tryst. He had cleared his throat and shook his head. “He will protect you while I
may be away from you.” He had finished in a rush.

She had felt something deep and fundamental churn in her belly when he said this, unthinkingly
counting her amongst the lofty company of those this Ghost would protect. She had come
blindingly, dangerously close to kissing him then, to vainly try to express her gratitude for him
simply being. For giving her this mighty thing as easily as passing her a quill. But the spell had
been broken by the arrival of Jorah, who had looked between them both with no small amount of
bleak understanding.

Her dark reverie broke at the sound of approaching hooves and she glanced about to see Jon riding
up with two other riders beside him-- the tall blonde woman she remembered from the Dragon Pit
and a young man she did not recognize.
She nodded to them as they drew up beside her. Jon turned in his saddle to look at the woman next to him. “Your Grace, this is Brienne of Tarth.” The woman in question bowed her head to her. “I have requested that she accompany you to Winterfell.”

Dany simply looked between the woman and Jon, slightly lost. Jon smiled, peering over at Brienne who was looking properly bashful. “She is one of the best swordsman I have ever seen, your Grace. It would comfort me greatly knowing that she will ride beside you.”

A spark passed between the two of them at that, and Dany flushed-- for more reasons than one. She willed herself straighter in her saddle as she looked at the woman, now garbed in handsome, burnished armor, poorly hidden under the cloak she bore. She looked every bit a Westerosi knight-- with the enormous exception of being a woman. “Please, take no offense, Lady Brienne, but I have never heard of a woman appointed to the guard of a Queen.”

Brienne nodded, looking somewhat aggrieved. “You would not be the first one to cast doubt, your Grace.”

Dany shook her head, displeased with herself. “That is not what I meant, Lady Brienne,” she said softly. “I have no doubt in your prowess if the Lord Snow deems it so. I only express surprise that a man would vouch for a woman in such a way.”

Jon looked at her, affronted. “You think me so boorish, your Grace?”

Dany offered a tiny smile in response, loving him all the more. “I will never doubt again, my Lord.”

Brienne glanced between the two of them questioningly, before continuing. “If you were to have me, your Grace, it should be my greatest honor.”

Dany nodded at her, smiling. “Of course, Lady Brienne. You shall ride with me and I shall be ever grateful. I should also be glad of the company of a woman.”

Brienne swelled a bit, looking chuffed. Dany watched as a small but satisfied grin spread across Jon’s face that made her melt, just a bit, despite the cold. “You are a vexing man, Jon Snow.”
He snorted, looking down at his reins.

“And who is this young man. Is he to ride with me as well?” She said as she looked over at the man in question. She watched as his eyes grew slightly wider, his throat working with an uneasy swallow.

“This is Podrick Payne, your Grace,” Brienne answered. “He is my squire. He is no swordsman yet, but he makes for amiable company.”

Most young men, brimming with the foolhardiness of youth, might have balked at this assessment, but Podrick only tilted his head agreeably, as if the woman’s words counted as unusually high praise. She liked him immediately. She nodded to him, gifting him her approval and he looked back at her a bit flummoxed, but satisfied all the same.

She leaned forward in her saddle towards Jon, trying, vainly, to keep her words private. “I wonder, my Lord, who is left to protect you if you are to gift me what I suspect is your only guard.”

Jon shook his head, unworried. “The Manderlys and their bannermen are sworn to me. I need no protection, your Grace,” He lifted a shoulder, feigning nonchalance. “Besides I have Sandor Clegane. He is as fierce in battle as you could ever wish. Though, he has been bested by our Lady Brienne,” he said, nodding to the woman in question, who looked immeasurably humbled.

She shook her head, suddenly grave and serious. “I shall command Rhaegal to fly with you and your armies.” Jon opened his mouth to protest but she cut him short before he could even take a breath. “Do this for me, my Lord. As it brings you comfort to know that Lady Brienne may ride beside me, it will bring me great comfort to know that Rhaegal will fly with you and our armies.”

Jon looked at her, paralyzed, utterly at her whim. She felt a lush and indulgent pulse of want jolt her to the roots of her hair as she leaned back in her saddle. “Aye, as you wish, your Grace,” he said, nodding, voice rough and throaty. “Give my love to my sisters and Bran when you arrive.” He smiled, not quite meeting his eyes. “Travel safe, my Queen.”

For someone who prided himself on being inscrutable, he was certainly failing at that endeavor now as he looked at her. Knowing, just as well as she, that they would be apart for more than a week, with many perils lain in their path back to each other. “Travel safe, my Lord” she returned, her voice low and lighted with worry.
He pulled his reins, turning his horse to ride away from them, his eyes trapped by her own until it proved too much and he kicked his horse into a canter. She watched his retreating form, a familiar dark dread scraping at her heart as she thought of the last time he had left her, a lifetime ago.

She felt the heat of the many eyes upon her back and she couldn’t help bristling like a trapped dog. “Am I a prize horse to be gawked at or your Queen?” She snapped, her patience already run dry. “Let’s get on with it, shall we?”

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She looked beautiful, astride her silver mare, Sansa had to admit.

She glanced down the line of people arrayed in the courtyard, all uneasy and restless. Lord Royce stood to her left, along with maester Wolkan and various servants. Arya, Bran and Samwell Tarly took up her right. It was such a paltry and ramshackle assembly in comparison to the last time they had welcomed royal guests and the realization only served to heighten her foreboding.

The Queen had dropped the hood of her cloak, oddly drab and ordinary dress for such a personage. Sansa, seeing the intricate weaves of her rare silver braids, suddenly had the very strange impression that the woman wore her hair as a crown. She rode beside a knight she did not know, though he was thoroughly Westerosi in dress and appearance. Her Dothraki bloodriders came in closely behind, looking as fearsome and terrible as she had imagined. Arya positively trembled in excitement beside her, ever the lover of the strange and unfamiliar.

Sansa watched as the rest of the Queen’s party trotted in. She attempted with all her will to not feel a sharp stab of betrayal as she caught sight of the Imp riding in beside Varys. She had known that Tyrion Lannister had been named Hand to the Queen, but seeing him in her home brought her no small amount of torment. Lady Brienne rode in with Podrick and Davos Seaworth and she could not help taking a small amount of reassurance at their familiar faces, at least. Her head shot up at the sound of a resounding screech that thrummed down her spine. Wheeling and turning above them was a massive black shadow-- a winged beast of legend that, despite her deference before, took her breath away. She heard Arya’s small, awed gasp from beside her.

Despite the dragon that circled overhead, she could not help but feel the Queen’s company a small and underwhelming affair. When the Baratheons had come to call, their cadre was ten times what the Dragon Queen could count among her number.

Arya shifted next to her, throwing her a questioning glance. They had both expected-- perhaps foolishly-- for the Queen to be in carried by a litter, or at least a carriage, and so they were taken
aback as she circled her horse to face the awaiting porter and dismounted as easily as she had done it thousands of times. Sansa also noted the lack of banners or heraldry, Targaryen or otherwise. Her and her companions had rode swiftly and in secret, she realized, and the measure of the danger Daenerys was willfully putting herself in order to join their cause struck her then, and stilled her worried heart, if only for a moment.

Dismounted and free of her horse, the Queen turned and walked towards them, looking grave and beautiful and alien amongst the snow and damp and rutted earth of the courtyard. “My ladies,” she greeted, bowing to each of them in turn with a gracious smile. “My lord,” she said, bowing to Bran who offered her the same cold stare as he did anyone else.

“Your Grace,” Sansa returned with a curtsy, pouring all the authority and grace she had gathered in her weeks as Lady of Winterfell. “I hope your travels did not prove too difficult.”

The Queen smiled tightly at her, looking for all the world like her travels had proved just as difficult as she had feared, but she shook her head. “The roads found me well, my Lady, thank you.”

“I am Sansa Stark, Lady of Winterfell in the King’s stead,” Sansa said and indicated Arya to her right. “And this is my sister, Arya Stark. And that is my brother, Brandon Stark.”

The Dragon Queen looked at all three of them in turn, a small, genuine smile lighting her face. “Your brother has told me much about you. He is proud beyond measure and misses you all terribly.”

The words themselves were simple pleasantries, usually given upon meeting an ally’s family, but something in the earnestness in her voice told Sansa that they were not simply for show.

To her great horror, Sansa felt Arya shifting on her feet beside her, craning her neck and looking to the sky. “Where are the other two dragons?”

Sansa felt the overwhelming urge to slap her upside the head for her impertinence, but The Queen simply looked at her, a strange and sad expression overcoming her. “Rhaegal flies with your brother.”

Arya looked at her, eyebrows raised in shock. “Well that was generous of you.”
“We are allies now, my Lady Stark. I cannot leave your brother unprotected.”

Something in the Queen’s face while she said this revealed much of what she had already suspected about the nature of her brother’s and the Queen’s’ relationship. She could not be sure if it comforted her or not.

Arya, ever graceless, pressed on. “So the third one? Where is he?”

“Forgive her, your Grace,” Sansa pleaded, giving her younger sister a deathly glare. “She has talked of little else since we learned of your arrival.”

The Queen shook her head. “No, it’s quite alright,” she said, eyes downcast. Her shoulders seemed to fall, her face slackening under the weight of something black and poisonous. Then she seemed to gather herself, standing up a bit straighter, taking in a steadying breath. “Viserion perished beyond The Wall, in an effort to save your brother and his men.”

There was such a deep tone of grief in her voice, though she had tried her best to hide it away, and Sansa could not help feel a small part of her break for this woman she had only just met. She had sacrificed a dragon to save her brother and those that did not serve her? She glanced over at Arya, who could only look at their visitor slack-jawed-- pale and stunned. “I am sorry, your Grace, to hear of your loss.” Sansa managed after the marvel of what she had just learned fully settled in. She looked down at her hands, not quite knowing what to say. “I did not know what you did for my brother, your Grace. I could never thank you enough.”

The Queen smiled at her then. It was something so sweet and sad that Sansa could not help but cast her eyes away, not feeling like she was allowed to see such a look manifest itself on a Queen of such repute. “I had little choice,” she said, her voice laden with dark and terrible things, “No thanks is needed.”

A heavy silence reigned for a time before Sansa noticed the rest of her party, having dismounted, were making their ways towards them. “I know that you and your people must be weary from your travels, your Grace. I shall see that you are shown to your quarters.”

The Queen smiled at her again, true and grateful, and turned away to step into Sansa’s home.

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“I cannot say that I am pleased with the sleeping arrangements,” Varys said with an irritated sigh as he idly lifted the lid of the dusty, battered clothes chest at the foot of the bed.

“I imagine chambers are scarce as of late,” Tyrion replied wryly from where he poured a cup of wine and promptly drained it. Varys had no doubt the man had sorely missed his drink during their hard days and cold nights of riding. “Winterfell is to house many lords and ladies in the coming weeks and they are all a smidge more important to please than us lowly creatures of the Queen’s company.”

Varys inclined his head in agreement, sitting upon the edge of his narrow bed. Though it seemed no more than a cot, plush furs adorned it, as they did the matching bed on the far wall. Their chamber, although shared and a bit cozy for his liking, still possessed a handsome hearth and a table and chairs in the corner for dining. He suspected this was the room the two younger Stark boys shared, if the crude carvings of bears and Direwolves on the bedpost were any indication.

“At least you are assured that I may not bring a woman to my chamber, my Lord,” he said with a pointed glance at the man in question, now sat at the table.

“As much as I may wish, my whoring days are long over, Lord Varys,” Tyrion replied within a sigh. “I have duties of the utmost import. And a Queen to protect.”

Varys leaned forward slightly, vexed and disbelieving. “I must admit I have been wondering for quite some time, my Lord Hand, who better to protect our Queen than the King in the North?”

Tyrion looked at him, his previous humor slipping from his face as he pursed his lips. “It is safer this way.”

Varys stood up, pacing slowly toward the other man with his eyes downturned, lost in thought, before lowering himself into the chair opposite him. He looked up at him, tilting his head in question. “For the road, perhaps, but for Winterfell? The Starks may provide reluctant protection for now, but what will happen once the lords that do not meet Jon Snow upon the Kingsroad arrive here before their King? What of our Queen’s protection then?”

Tyrion was silent for a time, tapping a knuckle upon the table. “You once said to me, Lord Varys, that I was good at playing the game. Why do you think that is?”

Varys shrugged, slightly taken aback by the question. “Well, for your intelligence, my Lord.
Though, I do not wish for this conversation to veer into the course of flattery.”

“Well you have failed in that, my Lord, for I am very flattered,” Tyrion returned with a wicked grin before pointing his finger down upon the table, stern and serious again. “I believe that to be good in this game we call politics and power one must eliminate complications.” He waved a hand to the room at large. “Uncertainties that could prove our undoing.” Varys nodded at that, all too aware of the various ‘complications’ he had scrubbed from his own path. “Jon Snow is a… complication.”

Varys barked a quick and shocked laugh at that, looking at his friend incredulously. “That sounds awfully like a condemnation, my Lord. Those are dangerous words to speak in such halls and in such company.”

Tyrion looked away as he shook his head. “You misunderstand me, my Lord. I think the Lord Snow a man of the utmost honor and I am fully aware of his importance to the Queen and her cause.”

Varys raised his eyebrows, a faint, knowing smile ghosting on his lips. “And yet?”

“My father was a cruel man in many ways,” he began heavily. “But he was a also a speaker of truths that many did not wish to talk of, especially to their children. Tywin did not shrink away from that, never once. If nothing else came from his teachings it was that all men were mortal but the family, my Lord… the family lives on.”

Varys lifted his eyebrows, ever more confused-- a feeling he was not wholly comfortable with. “I fail to see how this is pertinent, my Lord.”

“Jon Snow is in love with the Queen,” he said coldly, a bit over loud. “And Jon Snow is honest to a fault. He is not proficient in deception. You know this just as well as I do. The man holds his heart in his fist.” He lifted his cup, drinking deeply before continuing. “I know better than most the folly of a secret love affair, my Lord, and Robb Stark was named King in the North by the very same people who so named Jon Snow. And Robb Stark lost his head over the love of a woman-- a foreign woman-- and the North along with it.”

Varys leaned back in his chair, folding his hands into his sleeves, intensely curious.

“I know you've heard the saying 'the North remembers','” Tyrion continued, “And they will remember a wound as fresh and bitter such as that.”
“So you mean to separate them…” Varys replied, earnest in his dark uncertainty. “...so they may accept a foreign Queen without the voucher of their King? What is it that you wish of this?” Varys asked, thoroughly vexed, still unsure of where this path led to.

Tyrion poured himself another cup, looking thoughtful and a bit impatient that his friend had not caught on just yet. “I wish, my Lord, to not give the Northern lords reason to recall the fate of the Young Wolf when they look upon the Lord Snow. I wish for the Queen to ingratiate herself with the Starks.” He shifted in his seat, getting more comfortable, his face now thoroughly unworried. “And I have no doubt that they will come to love her in time.” He smiled at that, small and brief and faintly adoring. “Northerners are a tricksome lot, and as they made a King of a bastard-born boy, they can unmake him as well, but they will never betray the Stark name. If our Queen is to be made safe and hold the North with it, she needs more than the reassurances of a besotted King who only holds a crown by the words and swords of fickle men. She needs the Stark name behind her. And she will have it, by whatever gods Spiders and dwarves may swear to.”

Varys considered this, thinking it an odd and yet graceful plan. “The Boltons betrayed the Stark name,” he pointed out.

“And the Boltons are gone, wiped from the earth as good as sweat from my brow-- by the children of Ned Stark that the North thought to be dead or else lost.”

Varys’ eyes widened at that. He had not taken great interest in the Battle of the Bastards, but now he understood that the Starks could now rule out of fear as much as out of love. He looked away, thoughtful. “It seems that our Queen’s mission to save the Stark children’s beloved brother may not prove as foolish as you had initially perceived.”

“It wouldn't be the first time I was wrong and you were right, my Lord. And I expect it won't be the last.”

“And I suppose the Queen is unaware of the true reason for her separation from the King she holds so dear?”

“You think she would have agreed to such a plan?” Tyrion asked mildly. “In her eyes, Jon Snow is nigh invincible. For good reason, perhaps, but she would have argued with me all night over my lack of faith in Jon Snow’s discretion.” He sighed, placing his cup down and standing from his chair. “No, she will not know, but the Starks will come to love her despite it all, as all people seem want to do.” He threw Varys a knowing glance over his shoulder as he walked to his bed. “She charmed the stony Lord Snow, after all.”
“I hate to say that I impressed, my Lord,” Varys said with a smirk. “But it seems you have bested me in your scheming and ingenuity. I can only think that this will play out for the best for our Queen.”

Tyrion looked at him, doubt creasing his brow. “Is that the smell of pig shit or just the stench of what comes from your mouth?”

“I speak truly, my Lord.” Varys replied innocently.

“Then it has been a strange day indeed,” the man said, opening up his satchel on the bed. “First, a bloody raven shits on my head from a great height as we approach the gates of Winterfell.”

Varys snorted at that, indulged. “A hood of a cloak is usually the best and most elegant way of avoiding such messes, my Lord.”

“Then I am reunited with my lady wife,” the man continued, “and all the fires of all the Seven Hells would quail at the murderous look she granted me. And now, Varys the Spider is praising my scheming.” He pulled out a rumpled jerkin, appraising it with some despair at its condition. “Life is simply full of wonders. Now, leave me be for a bit. I think there are scullery maids for you to scare into your service and shadows for you to lurk in.”

Varys rose from his chair, frowning. “Do you know me so poorly, my Lord? I have already begun such work.”

Tyrion smiled at him, pleased. “Even so, I have not changed my underclothes in close to three days and I do not wish to injure your pride if you happen to catch sight of my stones and pillar, my Lord. Off with you.”

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She could not be more pleased by the warmth of her quarters as she sank into the fur bed with a sigh. Jon had spoken of the hot springs that heated Winterfell’s stony halls, but she had not fully anticipated how much until the chill had been sapped from her bones as good as a healing draught. She stretched languidly, her muscles unbearably sore and tight from days of hard riding.
She lay amongst the comfort and warmth of the furs, her mind a vicious swirl. She thought of Jon, marching up the same road she had just trodden, wondering if he yearned for her as much as she did him. She thought of the cold and beautiful woman that was the Lady of Winterfell, hair red as roe, skin pale as the scales off a fish. For whatever reason, she had always envisioned Jon’s siblings as younger than what she had discovered—less touched by a cruel and relentless world. The discovery of how wrong those conceptions had been brought her great sadness—no one was safe from the dark troubles that haunted every corner of the earth.

Her reverie was interrupted by a soft knock at the door. She sat up, climbing reluctantly from the comfort of the bed and opened the door. She was not expecting anyone—a silent agreement having been reached between her and those of her party that they may find solace in silence and solitude for at least a few hours.

Sansa Stark stood before her, looking unsure and slightly anxious. “Your Grace,” she said with a small curtsy. “I do not mean to intrude. I know that you must be tired…”

She shook her head, stepping aside so the other woman may enter. “Please, my Lady.”

Sansa flashed her a grateful smile and stepped more fully into the room. It was only then that Dany realized that she held a large and rather lumpy parcel under her arm. “What can I do for you, Lady Stark?”

Sansa pulled out the bundle from under her arm, presenting it to her uncertainly. “I… well, I made you something. A gift… for helping us, your Grace, in this time of need.”

Dany reached out an unsure hand, taking the silk wrapped package from her in profound curiosity. It was often customary to present a gift to a visiting ally, but she had not expected one in the light of the North’s distrust in her and those that followed her. Though now the presumption struck her as foolish, knowing the blood that her hosts shared with Jon Snow. She tugged on the knotted twine, the fabric falling away to reveal fur black as soot underneath. Dany gasped as she held it before her in both her hands, the heavy fabric unfurling like a rare tapestry.

It was a cloak— as weighty and stout as the one she had become so accustomed to Jon wearing. Tar-black wolf’s fur lined the inside and the top was crowned with a handsome pelt of the same hue. Filigreed into the right shoulder was the sigil of her house, etched in fine red thread.

Dany could not help the tears that brimmed in her eyes as she looked at the other woman standing before her, looking nervous and lost. “You honor me,” she managed, her voice tangled with all she was feeling. “Truly, my Lady. It is breathtaking.”
Sansa looked immeasurably pleased as she released a relieved breath. “I am glad you like it.”

Dany shook her head, stroking the fine fur with reverent fingers before tossing the garment about her shoulders. She felt the warmth of it bleed into her very marrow. Such a wave of power gripped her then as its considerable weight settled upon her shoulders. She might not be Northern by birth or upbringing, but she could not help feel a bit more of the North now, donning this heavy cloak with its wild wolf skin and supple mantle that reached to the tops of her ears. She studied herself in the warped and battered silver glass on the opposite wall, feeling oddly mystical and primeval-- a warrior queen with blood on her teeth and woad smeared on her brow. She turned back to Sansa, grasping her hands tightly. “You made this thing of beauty?”

Sansa nodded, a bit bashful. “It is the one thing I truly enjoy,” she said. “I made Jon’s cloak as well.”

This only served to humble her further, knowing how often Jon donned that very same cloak, though the weather may not have called for it. In her mind, it was as good as any crown for a King of such a brutal and beautiful realm. “I speak truly, Lady Stark, I cannot tell you the measure of my gratitude.”

Sansa shook her head. “No, it is I who honors you, your Grace,” she said, stepping away, her face wrinkled with a faint shame. “Now that I know what you have done for my brother, it is a weak thing compared to what I truly owe.”

Dany shook her head furiously, placing a hand upon the woman’s shoulder, ducking her head to catch her downcast eyes. “You know not of what you speak, my Lady,” she said fiercely. “I came to this place fearing to be treated as a stranger. An invader. This is a precious thing, that you have given me. It is not simply a cloak, Lady Stark, but a signal of the type of people you and your family are and what they have come to mean to me and my cause.”

Sansa looked up at her, her eyes relieved and just a bit adoring. “I am glad that a cloak can give you so much joy, your Grace.”

“I very much look forward to getting to know you better, my Lady,” she replied earnestly.

Sansa gave her a true and radiant smile. “As I do you, your Grace,” she returned with a small curtsy as she edged out the door. “I shall see you tonight. We will have supper together.”
With that she closed the door behind her and Dany hung the work of art she had been given upon a chair, before falling back into the furs with an astonished breath.

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The tall, dark man standing by the door nearly snarled at her as she approached. She felt herself warring with two desires-- pull out her Needle and see if Dothraki bled the same as Freys and Lannisters and all the rest-- or rain him with questions about the Dothraki Sea, the broken gods of Vaes Dothrak, which she was sure would be quite useless, as would killing him where he stood… as such she simply bowed. “I am Arya Stark,” she said, looking up at the strange man. “I have come to see the Queen.”

She was sure that the man had not understood any word she said-- save for “Stark”. At the mention of her name, he stepped aside reluctantly.

Arya knocked upon the door with only a second’s hesitation. Why should she fear the Dragon Queen? For all her titles and repute, she was but a woman in a strange place with few friends to comfort her.

The Queen opened the door, looking slightly peeved at the interruption, her hair a bit wild, as if she had been napping. Arya paid it no mind, finding the Queen’s moment of open disdain redeemable, if nothing else. “I have come to show you Winterfell,” Arya said with a smile. “Your Grace,” she added belatedly, nodding. She was not well trained in the managing of noble ladies and high-born monarchs.

The Queen blinked owlishly at her, as if not sure how to respond to such an abrupt visit-- and perhaps the nature of the visitor. Arya simply stood, hands behind her back with an inviting smile upon her face, being well used to fluttering nobles and their delicate sensibilities. The woman blinked several times, gathering herself. “I should be honored, Lady Stark.”

Arya was no Lady, but she did not correct her. You do not correct a Queen, afterall-- she knew that much. The Queen stepped away from the door and much shuffling ensued beyond before she emerged, resplendent in a clean but rumpled silver dress and an inky cloak with a three headed dragon threaded into the shoulder. Arya raised her eyebrows. “Your sister gifted it to me,” Daenerys said in wake of the question in her eyes. “Don’t you think it lovely?”

“It is,” Arya answered, slightly clipped and cold. Did this southern Queen actually appreciate the
weight of what she bore on her shoulders? Arya recognized her sister’s craftsmanship and knew it had taken the Lady of Winterfell many late night hours to create such a gift between the her multitudinous duties. “Do you insist on a guard?”

The Queen glanced down at her hands. “I am afraid I do, my Lady. I cannot yet trust walking amongst these halls unguarded just yet.”

Arya inclined her head. “I understand, your Grace. Fetch whoever. I’ll meet you in the yard.”

A few moments later, Arya Stark and Daenerys Targaryen stood in the yard of Winterfell with the strange Westerosi knight and Lady Brienne. It had truly been a queer day. Arya smiled at Brienne indulgently. “I’ve missed you, Brienne. I’ve been quite bored without you in the yard.”

The Queen looked over her shoulder at Brienne at this, quizzical. Brienne simply smiled and nodded back. “I look forward to our next lesson, my Lady.”

Daenerys looked insatiably curious at this exchange and her eyes found the sword at Arya’s belt. “You also practice with a blade?”

Arya nodded. “Aye, your Grace.” She patted the sword at her hip affectionately. “This is Needle. Jon had it made for me. It was his parting gift before going to The Wall.” She shifted, looking at the muddy ground. “It was the last time I saw him.”

A strange expression bloomed in the other woman’s face at that. Something like dreadful comprehension. “That was very kind of him,” she said quietly, looking between her and Brienne. “I know he misses you as much as you must miss him.” The Queen took a step towards her, looking about the yard where the clamor of wooden swords against wooden shields and the grunts and shouts of dozens of pairs of men practised around them. “Forgive me, Lady Stark, I was not aware that so many women practiced swordplay in the Seven Kingdoms.”

Arya considered this a moment. “Me and Brienne are the only two that I know of… but, forgive me your Grace, haven’t you fought in many battles?”

Daenerys looked at her, faintly taken aback. “I have, my Lady.”

“And you have never swung a sword?” Arya asked with a questioning tilt of her head. She knew
well the answer, but wished to hear what this strange woman claiming their savior had to say for herself.

“I have dragons. I am in no need of a sword.” The Queen replied with a faintly confused smile, as if it were to be obvious.

Arya took a step forward, eyes narrowed. “So did Visenya Targaryen.” Daenerys gazed at her with wide, shocked eyes bordering on outrage, but said nothing. “She wielded Dark Sister, and she and her sword and her dragon helped her brother to win the Seven Kingdoms.”

“You know of Aegon and his sisters?” The Queen asked, sounding faintly impressed.

“Everyone knows about Aegon,” she answered, “Fewer know about his sisters. But I am more interested in the women behind the conquerors and kings. And their swords and dragons.”

Daenerys straightened at that, looking oddly proud. “The Lady Stark speaks the truth, your Grace,” the old knight beside her said, stepping forward. “Learning the art of swordplay could only serve you for the better. In a war such as the one to come, who knows what may happen-- preparedness is the only weapon you can bare.”

Arya raised her eyebrows, pleased. “I could teach you, if you wish.”

The Queen smiled slowly at her, as if she were just coming to the realization that she might actually like her, though she may be odd and brash. “I think I would like that.”

Arya grinned, satisfied, before looking at the grim old knight standing tense as steel at the Queen’s right. “I don’t know this one,” she said. “Who are you? You look Northern to me.”

The knight cleared his throat, hanging his head and seeming to tremble in discomfort. “Jorah Mormont, my Lady.”

“Of Bear Island?” She asked, incredulous, stepping closer.

The knight nodded again, lips tight, not meeting her eyes. “Formally... of Bear Island, my Lady.”
“Jorah Mormont is my sworn shield, Lady Stark,” The Queen said levelly, a hint of threat poorly concealed in her words. “Where I should go, so shall he.”

Arya’s eyes flicked between the two of them, unsure how to proceed. “It’s strange that the Breaker of Chains would take in a former slaver.”

The echo of one of her titles visibly shook the woman, having not recited them to anyone since her arrival. “I believe in second chances, Lady Stark,” she said, a nervous edge growing in her voice. “Tell me, how did you know of that name for me?”

“I spent some time in Braavos, your Grace.”

The Queen raised her eyebrows at this, but said nothing and a silence reigned for a time.

“Well, this is the yard as you can see, your Grace,” Arya said without preamble and an outstretched arm, abruptly crashing through the thick quiet that had reigned. The Queen nodded, looking unsettled, but not fearful.

She lead them on, noticing some of the dark glances thrown in the Queen’s wake as they passed. She paid them little mind, for now. She lead them to the bustling armory and the Queen stopped, marvelling at the multitude of spear and arrowheads, axes and daggers-- all tipped and edged with the black and glittering mineral that her castle sat upon. “You’ve been quite busy,” she said, brushing a finger over an arrowhead in wonder.

Arya nodded. “We called on every blacksmith within the North who was able to travel here and help. There’s three more makeshift forges outside the castle walls. They work night and day, as Jon ordered.”

The Queen lifted her head at the word ‘Jon’, as if caught off guard-- hearing such a casual reference to the King in the North. It was a small thing, hardly anything of note to many, but Arya took note of it-- she knew the truth often resided within the small things.

“This is a wonderful thing,” the Queen said, lifting a spearhead before her and examining it. “Who is the master of this forge?” She called out to the men before her who had not noticed her arrival--sweaty and strained in their toil.
Upon the shout they all turned, some dropping to their knees at the realization of just who their visitor was. More simply bowed shallowly, looking surly. The Queen shook her head. “Please, do not allow me to delay your work.” With that, the men turned back to their forges and hammers, except for one.

Arya’s heart halted as a black haired man with dangerously familiar eyes stepped towards the Queen from his place at the bellows. He nodded to her, “That’d be me, for now, your Grace.”

“How…?” She said breathlessly, stepping towards him. He refused to meet her eyes, head stubbornly bowed. “How did you get here?”

She watched as the man before her swallowed, uncaring of the stares of the Queen and her guard. He did not answer. “How long have you been here?” She asked, voice taking on a hot tinge of anger.

The man shifted, his distress as palpable as the heat sloughing from the forge. “Few days,” he managed.

“Why didn't you come find me? Are we no longer friends?”

The man simply shifted on his feet, looking tormented. Suddenly, Arya realized he would reveal no more before the Queen and her company. She would have to find him later, alone, to get any of the answers she wished from him. She cleared her throat, gathering herself. “It is good to see you, friend.”

Gendry nodded, finally meeting her eyes for a moment, a small smile flickering on his face. “Aye, and it is good to see you, my Lady.”

Arya stepped back from him, still astonished but willing it away for a later time. She looked over at
the Queen who was gazing at her with an air of knowing that she did not much like. Daenerys returned her attention to the man before her. “Gendry, is it? You have done fine work here. I wish to thank you for such a service.”

Gendry shook his head and Arya saw a blush color his cheeks. “It is nothing, your Grace.”

“You must know more of the armies who follow me than I could have hoped for so far from Essos, my Lord,” the Queen said appraisingly as she handed him the spearhead she held. “My Unsullied will be well armed for the war to come.”

Gendry nodded again, hands folded behind his back. “Aye, your Grace. Ser Davos told me much of you and your armies on our way to the Wall. He wished to see me here, in the Winterfell forges— to see that your soldiers were armed with the weapons of their choosing just as the Northerners would be.”

Daenerys’ eyebrows shot up nearly into her hair at that. “You were at the Wall?”

“Aye. Davos collected me from King’s Landing for the purpose of putting me in the forges, but I refused, at first. I pledged myself to Jon Snow and his mission beyond the Wall.”

Arya watched as Daenerys smiled, her eyes soft with gratitude. “So why do I not know of you, Lord Gendry? Why were you not among the men I delivered from the frozen lake?”

Gendry shook his his head. “There’s not much to know, your Grace. I am a bastard and a blacksmith and not much else. I can only say that I delivered the message to Eastwatch. The message meant for you.” He looked up at her, his face lined and solemn. Arya thought he looked much older than he was in that moment. “To know that I delivered the message that sent you to them, your Grace, is the highest honor I think I’ll ever know.”

Arya looked on as the Queen’s face simply illuminated, lit with something bright and fierce that she could not quite identify. “I think you may have higher honors yet, Lord Gendry,” she said with a soft, almost grateful smile. Gendry looked properly bashful, bowing lower to her than was probably strictly needed. The Queen folded her hands before her and looked amongst the cache of weapons arrayed before her. “I see no Dothraki arakhs among your works, my Lord.”

Gendry shrugged. “I would make one, your Grace, but I have never seen one in my life.”
“I shall send one of my bloodriders to you. Then you may see such a weapon and fashion ones like it in your forge.”

Gendry smiled at her, his passion for his craft over taking whatever anxiousness that gripped him—suddenly excited at the prospect of working something different than a simple dagger or axe. He bowed. “Thank you, your Grace.”

She shook her head. “It is I that thanks you, my Lord. You have done me and the King in the North a great service. I shall see that such labor is rewarded.”

The man nodded, too flustered to say much of anything, turning away to his work again. Arya stepped forward. “Well…” she said with a sigh, feeling hurt and spent at discovering her long lost friend right under her nose. “Shall we move on?”

She led them on to the stables, the rookery, the kennels. The Queen admired them all in turn, speaking words of praise for anything she deemed worthy. Arya would have found this tiresome from most, but from Daenerys, her words rang fully rather than hollow.

They came upon the Godswood, and Arya turned to face the Queen and her guard. “This is the Godswood,” she said solemnly. “Do you know of the Old Gods, your Grace?”

Daenerys shook her head, her eyes suddenly regretful. “I am afraid not, my Lady.”

“The Old Gods are the gods of house Stark. The gods of the North. The Godswood is their sept.”

She watched as the Queen leaned to her left, just a bit, regarding the metal gates closed and locked tightly behind where Arya stood. “Is it customary to keep the Old Gods’ place of worship locked up, Lady Stark?”

Before Arya could respond a great and resounding clang of flesh on metal sounded from behind her. She stepped away, turning to see the fearsome form of Ghost, pressing his enormous snout through the bars of the gate in a vicious and bloodthirsty snarl. She turned back to look at the Queen—shaken and pale, but unmoved, not even a step.

“Ghost!” Arya shouted. “Be still!” But the wolf carried on, thrashing at the gate that bowed and swayed before his considerable weight. “I’m sorry…” she trailed off, not quite knowing what else
to say. The wolf had been acting strangely, the past few weeks. Her and Sansa had thought it anxiety-- being away from his master for so long. Nevertheless, Arya had not seen a display such as this. She could not help but regard the Queen who stood before her with a slow-waking suspicion. She had just been beginning to like her.

“No,” Daenerys breathed, shaking with shock. “No, it’s quite alright.”

To Arya’s astonishment, the woman stepped closer, bringing herself within mere feet of a beast who looked intent on only rending the flesh from her bones. Slather ran down Ghost’s jowls, his silver-white fur bristling malevolently, red eyes glowing like hellfire. Jorah and Brienne shifted uncomfortably behind her, hands on their pommels.

“You will not hurt him,” Arya nearly growled, gripping the pommel of her own sword.

“Let him out,” the Queen said to her. It was the first hint of command Arya had heard in her voice yet.

“What?”

“My Queen--”

“You cannot--”

“I said let him out.” The Queen spat through gritted teeth, a fresh and hungry fire blazing in her voice as she took a few steps back. Not in fear, Arya realized, but in welcome. Ghost growled and moaned from behind the bars, baring his pearly teeth.

Arya slowly walked closer to her. “Your Grace, Ghost is not... himself,” she finished somewhat lamely. “I think it would be better if we returned later. Or perhaps you should meet him when my brother--” She stopped short at the look the Queen gave her then. She was struck by it as good as the pierce of a lance. She knew why, now, thousands followed her-- why Tyrion Lannister would betray his own house, why a disgraced knight might seek solace in service to this castaway Queen, why her brother might very well find himself in love with such a woman. She could not help but feel cowed, awed-- if even for an instant-- at the inferno that warred within the Queen’s eyes.

“Open the gate,” she said simply, terribly, and Arya found that she could not resist such a command.
She took the key from her belt, having it on her at all times so as to walk amongst the quiet of the wood and lay with Ghost beside the pool. She walked to the gate slowly, giving the Queen one last look of question. The woman only nodded, grave and determined. Arya placed the key in the lock, dodging long and savage claws as she did so, and twisted it until she heard the scream of iron on iron.

The gates burst open and Ghost flew through in a storm of white fur and red eyes. Daenerys stood firm as the beast careened toward her, nearly as tall as she was. The wolf stopped, massive paws digging into the mud and sending it splashing onto the woman, who did not flinch as it slapped upon her dress and cheeks. Ghost stood before her, legs spread wide in a fighting stance, face wrinkled in a savage grin as he looked at her with the unrelenting wish of violence.

Arya looked on as the Queen took a steadying breath, placing one foot in front of the other to bring herself closer to the beast-- and then yet another. Arya watched as Brienne and Jorah shifted, crouching down and ready to strike. Arya would run them through if they tried, but felt a sudden and queer certainty that such efforts would not be needed.

Ghost’s stance did not soften, but neither did he leap upon the Queen and rip out her throat. Then the Queen did something very peculiar indeed. She knelt upon the cold and muddy ground, her head bowed in supplication.

Arya glanced at Jorah and Brienne, who only stared back at her in horrified incredulity. Ghost seemed to relent, slowly-- his muscles loosening, his black lips lowering over his deadly fangs. He trotted up to the woman, unsure, sniffing at the white crown of her hair.

Ghost let out a resounding bark that had all three of them clutching at their swords with new found horror before the wolf set upon the Queen with delighted licks and small whines of pleasure, his tail wagging furiously. Daenerys held up her hands to stay the onslaught, but her attempts against a beast of such size proved to be futile. Arya looked on as Ghost nearly sent the fearsome Dragon Queen tumbling into the mud as his excitement and joy kicked up to levels she had scarcely seen before.

Finally, after several breathless moments of this, The Queen lifted herself from the muddy earth. She looked back at Arya and she felt her breath leave her, despite herself. Slick, gray mud streaked her cheeks, the black mantle of her cloak casting her skin into a deathly and glowing hue. As she stood, Ghost took up behind her, red eyes burning over her shoulder-- a hellion beast delivered from a realm not of their making.

“What… what did you do?” Arya asked, breathless.
“I know of magic, my Lady,” The Queen answered, reaching over her shoulder to scratch at the wolf’s chin. Ghost whined, pleased, stepping closer and lowering his head over her shoulder. Arya was not certain she would ever see anything so beautiful or mythic in all her years. “Magic does not do well with chains and bars.”

Arya swallowed, uncomfortable, feeling the guilt flame up within her belly like flint on fresh tinder. “He was acting queer,” she said quickly, casting her eyes downward. “With Jon gone so long, he started snapping at people. He nearly killed our Master at Arms.” She shrugged, helpless and feeling lower than the moss on the bottom of a stone. “We locked him up in the Godswood. We did not know what else to do until Jon came back...” she trailed off, feeling strange at her inability to meet the other woman’s gaze.

The Queen stepped closer to her, looking as serene and powerful as whatever bid the tide in and out each day. “I chained my dragons when they grew fearsome,” she said, sad and knowing. “It nearly killed me, but it was the only thing I knew to do... to protect them, to protect those that they may mean to harm.”

It was a benediction, Arya realized. She simply nodded, the painful understanding behind the Queen’s gaze enough to comfort her, but not enough to regain her voice.

The Queen turned to her guard, suddenly chipper and warm, as if she had done nothing more pet a cat. “Come, let us head back and prepare for supper tonight,” she said. She turned back to Arya, feeling small and bereft after what she had just seen. “I very much look forward to getting to know you better, Lady Stark. Thank you for all your kindness and trouble in showing me your home.”

Arya nodded at her, rendered mute for the time being, it would seem. The Queen offered her a parting smile and turned to leave. Ghost trotted up to her, giving her a warm lick upon her cheek. Arya looked up at the wolf, whose red eyes looked at her softly in the gray light. She fisted a hand in his rough fur, breathing in his mossy, snow-melt scent. Ghost sighed a breath, touching his cold nose to her brow in an oddly reassuring way, before galloping off to catch up with the party of the Queen.

Arya watched their retreating backs for some time. It had been a very queer day indeed.

Chapter End Notes

You guys. I have so much written for this and lots and lots of plans. The original draft for this chapter was 38 pages long. I broke it in half. So, good news the next chapter won't take three weeks to get out!
Y'all's support truly means the world to me.

Thanks very much to SakuraBlossom for reading this over for me!
The dragon turned away, huffing a despairing breath. Jon dared a step closer, taking up the torch again. “You miss your mother, don’t you?” The dragon emitted a small, high whine as if in answer.

The storm that raged outside the lashing canvas of his tent would set them back at least a two days. Maybe more.

He looked at the borrowed map sprawled before him on the small table, his eyes glazed and unfocused. Try as he might, all of his thoughts circled and centered on Daenerys like shadow cats on a scent. He worried, uselessly, that his plans for her travel might not have proven as steadfast as he had hoped, that at that very moment she sat upon a cold hill in the same cruel winds with no tent to protect her. Even worse— that she laid safe and warm in a fur bed in Winterfell, wishing him ill that he had abandoned her so easily.

It didn’t help that his meeting with Grey Worm had been as bleak as it was. The Unsullied were steadfast, but more furs were needed for them and Jon had not the slightest idea of where to get them. For now, he had sent a party of thirty Northmen out to trap game for fur and meat alike. The dark glances the chosen men had exchanged when given these orders did not do much to assuage his troubles.

“You should rest, Snow,” Sandor said to him as he strode in, endlessly exasperated. Jon flinched at the abrupt interruption to his idle worries. It was the third night in a row his sworn shield had given him the same song and dance and he looked thoroughly tired of it. “It is a long march tomorrow.”

Jon looked up at him, unamused. “Aye and a long one after that,” he replied tiredly.

The Hound tilted his head at that, agreeing. “More reason for you to rest.”

“How many times are you going to tell me that?”
“A few more,” the man said simply as he lowered himself into the only chair afforded to guests in the small and crude tent afforded to him. The Hound took up the flagon that had sat abandoned on the table before him, pouring himself a horn. He lifted it toward Jon who only shook his head. “All’s the better,” the man muttered, pouring more into the cup before drinking deeply.

Jon looked at him curiously, silent and considering. “You’re a strange man, Clegane.”

The Hound leaned back in his chair, belching. “Aye? And why’s that?” He asked disinterestedly, draining the last of his cup.

“I thought your days of serving Kings were behind you.”

Sandor shifted in his seat, tucking a thumb into his belt. “There’s nothing behind me but a trail of corpses.” The man paused, pouring himself another horn of ale. “Besides, you don’t need my sword, Snow. I’ve seen you fight and you’re better than me, you shit.” Jon grinned at this. He had to admit that The Hound’s rough company on the road was something of a relief—being King, people never acted in their true selves around you. Save for Davos whose candid company Jon sorely missed. “I pledged my sword to you so I could sleep on a cot instead of the cold ground and drink up all your ale.” He took another long draw from his cup, seemingly illustrating his point. “And you don’t talk much. That makes you better company than most of the blabbering cunts out there.”

Jon laughed quietly, looking at his gloved hands, not quite convinced. “I can’t help but think you’re not telling me the whole of it.”

The Hound looked at him murderously, placing his horn down on the table with some enthusiasm. “You might be a King, Snow, but that doesn’t mean you get to tell me what my fucking reasons are for doing things.”

Jon shrugged. “Have it your way, Clegane, but the reasons you’ve given don’t explain why you refused my offer.” He threw the quill he had been mindlessly fiddling with back upon the table. “A castle is a fair bit more comfortable than a cot in a tent.”

“And what did I do to deserve a bloody castle?” The man growled, growing ever more agitated.

Jon raised his eyebrows at that, leaning forward in his chair. “You saved my sisters. You’re the reason they’re alive and in Winterfell as we speak.”
“Aye, so I’ve earned a castle and some soft-titted wife for helping children?”

He lifted a shoulder. “It’d be a start.”

The Hound tilted his chin up at him. “Would you have accepted such a reward, Snow?” Jon leaned back in his chair at that, defeated. The Hound shifted in his seat, his face darkened with a distant anger. “All my life I’ve seen shit King after shit King sit their soft asses on that fucking iron chair. I served one of those shits, and I swore to all the humorless cunts that we call gods that I’d never serve another.” He leaned forward, taking up the flagon again only to find it empty. He placed it back down forcefully, his ire now at its breaking point. “You may be a broody bastard, Snow, but you’re no shit King.”

Jon leaned back, feeling humbled to be praised so by such a man. He grinned coldly. “Aye, but I won’t be a King much longer.”

The Hound snorted, twirling the horn cup he held in his hands. “So I’ve heard.”

Both men fell silent for a time. The Hound reached forward to grab the half-eaten chicken leg that had sat forgotten and cold on the plate in front of Jon. He tucked in with gusto as Jon gazed into the small brazier next to him. “Do you think it the right decision?”

The hound snorted, a bit taken aback as he wiped his mouth with his wrist. “Why ask me, Snow? I’m not your advisor,” he returned thickly, picking meat from his teeth as he tossed the empty bone back onto the plate.

“Aye, my advisor is in Winterfell.”

The Hound leaned back in his chair, rubbing the grease off his fingers on his pants. “I am no bloody advisor.”

Jon nodded, contemplative. He looked up at the man sat before him, peering at him with solemn eyes. “Do you know how I came to be King the North? How I was released of my vows to the Night’s Watch?” The Hound paused before shaking his head, badly feigning disinterest as he turned his gaze elsewhere. “I made an unpopular decision. A decision I still think to be right, but one that saw me stabbed to death by my own brothers.” The Hound emitted a strange, guttural sound at this-- as if suppressing a howl of outrage. “I was brought back by a force I cannot begin to
understand.”

The Hound nodded, strangely sage in that moment. “The Lord of Light.”

“Someone,” Jon replied. “Someone brought me back and I have lived every day since to be worthy of it.” He held a hand out, tilting it in welcome of any advice from the man that sat before him. “I have made another very unpopular decision, bending the knee to Daenerys Targaryen. Unpopular decisions get me killed.”

“Oh fuck that,” the Hound blurted, his face twisted in disgust. The man looked down, seeming thoroughly frustrated that he had revealed himself in such a way, but pushed on regardless. “I’ve seen the evil that lives inside the hearts of all men, rich or poor, King or peasant. Real, bloody darkness, Snow. And I know you’ve seen it too. The things men can do to one another for power or glory whatever fucked thing they can think of that day.” He looked at him, his face quivering with an old and familiar rage. “But you and this… Dragon Queen, you’re both fighting for something bloody real. Something that actually fucking matters. It’s the only fight worth having.” He brushed his stringy hair from his face, looking pensively to the ground. “I saw the army of the dead, good as you, and I saw her dragons melt them away by the bloody score, good as you. I’d be marching right along with that blue cunt with the spear if it weren’t for her and her bloody dragons.” The man spat upon the floor of the tent, looking ready to rend flesh from bone. “If any fool Northern cunt tries anything on you for bending the knee to her, I’ll fuck them bloody.”

A stunned silence reigned as Jon tried to grapple with what had just happened. He finally tilted his head with a small, rueful smile. “I hope your… services will not be required, Clegane.”

The Hound looked at him, a feral grin snaking over his face. “Aye,” he nearly growled. “I hope to save all my killing for the dead.” He leaned back in his chair, kicking up a booted foot on the toe of the other. “Now quit your bloody winging or I’ll accept that fucking castle and ride south tomorrow.”

Jon found himself grinning, but the expression slid from his face as an alien and mournful cry rent through the incessant howl of the wind like a thunder bolt. He found himself on his feet, seemingly beyond his volition. “What in the bloody hells is that?” The Hound asked as he stood from his chair, looking about the tent fretfully as if the source of the sound stood among them.

“A dragon,” Jon replied before striding from the tent.

Snow flew furiously around them like a swarm of hungry locusts as they left the safety of the tent. Jon stood, listening for a moment, before another foul scream sliced through the frigid air and into
his very bones. He marched forward, suddenly knowing where he needed to be. He heard The
Hound’s uncertain step behind him and he looked back, never stopping. “Stay here.”

Clegane stopped, looking unhappy at being left behind, but remained where he was all the same.
Jon walked past row after row of tents, banners of all colors and shapes. Most every man was
tucked away, eager to find shelter amidst such a fierce storm and the camp was oddly silent and
desolate in the wake of it. He could not begin to think of all the men under his command, his
protection, as he passed. Men who would die at his behest. He shook his head, clearing it to focus
on the trial at hand, for now.

He reached the outskirts of the camp. The night guards posted looked at him, exhausted and
windswept. They bowed to him, muttering their respects tiredly. He nodded, desperate to do
something for them-- bring them a hot cup of broth or an extra blanket-- but he could only ask for a
torch and be on his way.

He walked for hours, it seemed, though it was no more than a quarter mile, before he came across
what he had been looking for.

Rhaegal lay curled amongst the embers of a great fire of his own making. As Jon approached, the
beast let out another lonesome wail, sounding much like a wolf pining for its lost mate.

Jon inched forward, careful and slow, willing his breath to normal levels. He did not want to give
the dragon any reason to think that he feared him and roast him to a cinder. He took a hesitant step
into the ring of melted snow and burned grass before him, steam curling around his feet like weeds.
He could feel the warmth through the thick soles of his boot. He looked down, hesitating,
wondering if the heat of the ash would melt the leather away. He took another step.

The dragon wheeled his great head around, yellow eyes trapping him within their mighty and
deadly light. Jon held out his hands, slowly placing the torch upon the ground. “I mean you no
harm, Rhaegal,” he called through the biting wind.

The dragon leaned his face closer, taking in his scent with a great breath before sighing, sending
Jon’s hair flying back and his skin pulling tight with goose flesh with the warmth of it. He lowered
his hands as the great beast before him blinked, his gaze almost seeming to soften. He reached out
a hand, suddenly desperate to feel the ancient warmth that resided within him.

The dragon turned away, huffing a despairing breath. Jon dared a step closer, taking up the torch
again. “You miss your mother, don’t you?” The dragon emitted a small, high whine as if in answer.
Jon nodded. “I do too,” he said earnestly. He reached out a hand, placing it doubtfully upon the
thorny hide of the dragon’s neck. He could feel the heat of him even through the thick leather of his gloves. The dragon lifted his head, facing him again, blinking at him sadly. “That’s one thing we have in common, right?” He said with a stilted smile, still unsure of the beast’s acceptance of him. He threw out an arm, feeling foolish and afraid in equal measure, conversing with such a creature. “We both love the same woman.”

Rhaegal lowered his head as if in invitation, chirruping in what Jon could only perceive as understanding. He placed an unsure palm onto his great snout and the dragon emitted a low and guttering rumble that seemed to come from his chest. The whole ordeal, strangely enough, struck Jon as petting a quite large and spiky cat. He couldn’t help but smile as the dragon settled, laying his chin upon the ground with a rumble. “Not so fearsome, are you?” He said as he slowly lowered the torch to the ground.

Rhaegal sighed, turning his head to the side and dragging the half-eaten corpse of a stag toward him, dropping the bloody charred mess at his feet. The dragon looked at him expectantly, as if in offering. Jon shook his head. “Oh, uh, thank you. Thank you very much, my friend, but I just ate.”

The dragon blinked at him, as if unsure why anyone would refuse such a fine piece of game, but settled back down, bringing his wing up more fully around where Jon stood, effectively blocking him from the harsh winter winds that circled about them like hungry jackals.

Jon felt… oddly *comforted*. The dragon’s acceptance of him was as weighty of a benediction as he could ever hope for. He looked about him, at Rhaegal’s little nest of warm ash and charred bones and realization hit him like a blow from a mace. He strode around to look at the dragon fully in the face. The beast opened his golden eyes and gazed back, almost curiously. Jon suddenly felt unbearably foolish. How does one ask a favor of a dragon? He bowed haltingly and Rhaegal lifted his head, sniffing at him again. “I must ask a favor of you, Rhaegal,” he said loudly but shakily over the wind. “Your mother’s armies are short on furs. They will freeze without them.” He stepped closer and Rhaegal showed his teeth, menacing. Jon swallowed, taking the same step back with his hands outstretched. “I aim to get them furs, my friend, but it will take time. They need a warmer space to camp. Could you do this?” He said, casting about with his arms spread. “But much bigger? When we camp at night?”

The dragon simply blinked at him. *What the bloody hells did you think was going to happen?* “There’s another thing,” he said pleadingly as the dragon turned away. “This storm will take us days to dig out of. But not if we have dragonfire to clear our way.” Rhaegal stilled, having become twitchy and restless at Jon’s ceaseless talk. “You miss your brother and mother. Help us get to them faster, my friend.”

The beast swung his great thorny head back to face him, taking a stride forward so that Jon’s nose nearly touched Rhaegal’s own. Jon was quite certain that he had forgotten how to breathe, the blood singing in his veins with a heady mix of fear and rapture.
The dragon chirped again and lifted his head above Jon’s own to unleash an almighty roar that nearly knocked him from his feet. The dragon flapped his mighty wings and turned from him, curling his tail around his body as if settling for sleep.

Jon, breathless and stunned, grabbed the torch from the ground and strode away quickly, his mind racing like a young colt.

The next morning, they drove their carts and marched their men through the huge furrows that had been burned into the snow.

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“What do you wear to a supper with a Dragon Queen?”

Sam shook his head, growing ever more impatient. “How should I know?” He said as he pulled up his breeches. “Do I look like I know much about pretty dresses and fancy feasts?”

Gilly threw down the dress she had been holding upon the bed in defeat. “You know lots of things,” she responded, a bit petulant. “And I saw where you grew up-- you must know something of fancy feasts.”

Sam tilted his head, not able to argue this fact. “That might be true, but I don’t think the Dragon Queen will bother herself with offenses of fashion, Gilly. I’m sure whatever is best will be fine,” he said as he continued the tricksome task of lacing up his ‘finest’ jerkin. “I mean, look at me!” He exclaimed as he turned to face her, arms outstretched. “This is my best jerkin and the lacing is fraying! I’m also quite certain that it smells of horse piss.”

Gilly let out a frustrated breath flapping her hands. “You are no help,” she muttered as she retrieved the dress she had just thrown from the bed, holding it out once more. “And you need horse piss for proper leather anyway,” she added matter of factly. Sam frowned at that, knowing that she must be correct. She stepped towards him, eyes downturned nervously. “She frightens me.”

Sam placed reassuring hands on both her elbows. “Frightens you? Why would she frighten you, Gilly?” He asked incredulously.
Gilly shook her head, her face shadowed by nameless worry. “She has dragons. I’ve only ever heard terrible things about dragons.”

“And what tales about dragons did you possibly hear north of the Wall?”

Gilly glared at him and he quailed, just a bit. “I know some things, you know,” she said defiantly. “Craster used to tell us stories… to scare us. To keep us from running away. He told us of dragons that lived at the top of the world. Dragons with blue eyes and frost for breath. He used to say that they were bigger than anything you’ve ever seen and they would wake some day and end the whole world. They would breathe their frost over everything until it was all frozen and dead.”

“Well that certainly sounds like a good story.”

“You’re laughing at me,” she replied with a dark glare.

“No, no, just--” Sam sighed, trying to give her a reassuring smile as he brushed his hands over her arms. He loved Gilly dearly, but her dogged superstition annoyed him to no end-- for no other reason other than he knew how smart she really was. “Dragons are fire made flesh, Gilly, they cannot be made of ice, too.”

“How would you know?” She said angrily. “Are you an expert on dragons now?”

Sam sighed heavily, tilting his head. “No, but even still, Gilly,” he said, walking away from her, deeming it a lost cause. “Dragons burn with the flame of Old Valyria… or at least that is how I understand it. There is no Ice of Old Valyria, now is there? Now, hurry up, we’ll be late.”

After a few more thrown dresses and the calming of Little Sam, they set off for the Great Hall.

This was to be no feast-- with winter at their door and many mouths to feed through it all, the castle could not afford such a luxury. But, ever the gracious host, Lady Sansa had arranged a rather more opulent meal for her household and their royal guests that night. Afterall, most evenings found him taking his supper in his chamber, being very careful to not spill his wine on the manuscripts he pored over. As modest an affair as it might be, Sam was anxious all the same.
The Great Hall had been properly freshened and now blazed with light and warmth. More often than not the room sat dismal and cold these days-- even during meetings and councils. He smiled broadly as he entered, excitement thrilling through his veins-- not just at the prospect of a hearty meal, but at finally speaking to Daenerys Targaryen, a woman he had only heard tale of and never dared to think he would ever meet in the flesh.

As he had suspected, they were late. The Stark siblings, Lord Royce, and the Queen and her companions already sat at the High Table. He felt a blush creep into his cheeks, thanking the Old Gods and the New that at least they had arrived before the food.

He lead Gilly to the two chairs left unoccupied, which-- to his immense disappointment-- were sat well away from the Queen, at the end next to maester Wolkan.

“I apologize, my Lady, your Grace,” he said with a bow to each woman in turn. “We had some problems with Little Sam.” He indicated the boy resting on Gilly’s hip, only half lying. Gilly, looking pale and horrified, curtsied to them both belatedly.

Sansa shook her head with a warm smile. “No need to apologize, my Lord. We have only just arrived.”

The Queen, seated to Sansa’s left, leaned over the table to better see their tardy guests. She looked up at Sansa questioningly who flinched, as if she had just remembered her manners. “Forgive me, your Grace, I have forgotten that you had not met properly before. This is Samwell Tarly, one of my brother’s oldest friends. And that is Gilly, a refugee from north of the Wall and Samwell’s companion. And the boy is her son, named Sam after the man who saved them.”

Sam watched as a very peculiar expression rose in the Queen’s face at this introduction. She looked at Sam, her face flashing with some terrible and strange understanding. Sam couldn’t help but feel queer, but the troubled expression was gone in a blink as she offered him a smile. “Welcome, my Lord, my Lady,” she said warmly, nodding to them both. “Any friend of Jon Snow is a friend of mine as well.”

Sam bowed again, now thoroughly unsure as to how to proceed. He could only grasp the chair in front of him and sit, throwing another questioning glance to the Queen who now leaned towards her Hand, whispering fervently.

Before he had time to think on it much longer, dinner arrived and he was enthusiastically distracted for the duration. Having eaten his fill, he sat sated and blissful. He leaned back in his chair with a sigh, swigging his wine wholeheartedly. Even Gilly, tense the whole while, looked a bit more at
He felt something cold and wet nudge his ear and he looked over to see the blood-red eyes of Ghost staring thoughtfully back at him. “Ghost!” He cried, throwing his arms around him. He had not seen the beast since he arrived and only now was realizing how much he had missed him. He pulled away to scratch his ears, delighted. “I sure hope you’re done growing, boy. Look at you! You’re massive!”

Ghost sat back on his haunches, and that is when he noticed the Queen standing behind the wolf, looking at Sam curiously. He emitted a strangled yelp, almost spilling his wine in his haste to stand, but the woman held out a hand, staying him. “Do not trouble yourself, Lord Tarly.”

Sam relaxed in his chair, stunned and silent. Gilly stared up at the Queen in awe as Little Sam tugged at her hair happily. Daenerys turned to face her. “So this is Little Sam?” Gilly could only nod as the Queen leaned closer, bending at the waist to look at the little boy more properly. “He is simply gorgeous, my Lady,” she said, offering the babe a finger, which he grasped with a delighted squeal. The Queen laughed, enraptured. “How old is he?”

“Nearly three, your Grace,” Gilly answered shakily.

The Queen shook her head in wonder, straightening. “He will be a charmer, I am sure of it.”

Gilly nodded, smiling. “I think so too, your Grace. Thank you.”

To both his great joy and utter horror, the Queen turned her gaze to him. “I wonder, Lord Tarly, if we may have a word in private?”

“Of course, your Grace, but—” he replied slightly breathless as he looked around, stunned. “You wish an audience with me?”

The Queen simply gazed back at him, nonplussed. Sam nodded and rose unsteadily from his chair, exchanging a curious look with Gilly, before setting off behind the Queen.

She led him to a makeshift larder off the back of the Hall, The rafters hung thick and heavy with sausages and hams. The floor was strewn with soiled straw and the walls were stacked high and haphazardly with surplus crates of vegetables of all varieties. She set down the taper she had
pilfered from the Great Hall on an obliging barrel of pickled fish. The room was redolent with smells both sweet and foul. He thought it a very strange place for an audience with a Queen.

She turned to face him as Ghost padded in from behind him, where he had unknowingly halted at the door. Between the multitudes of boxes and barrels, himself, the Queen, and a large Direwolf, the quarters proved to be quite close. “Close the door, if you would, my Lord.”

Sam did as he was bidden, as uneasy as he was. With the door closed, the room was now cast in a proper darkness, save for the frail and flickering light of the candle sitting beside the Queen. Ghost laid down in the one corner he could find, yawning noisily. Sam nodded to the wolf, desperate to break the tense silence. “He seems quite fond of you.”

Daenerys looked over at the beast, her eyes soft with affection. She pulled a bone from under her sleeve, no doubt stolen from her own plate from supper. She tossed it to him and Ghost caught it, gnawing happily. Sam took in the display with no small amount of astonishment. He was quite sure he’d never think to see a Queen keep a fresh and bloody bone within the silks and furs of her dress to please a Direwolf. “Yes, he does,” she said with a faint smile. “I’ve grown quite fond of him myself.”

There was a brief but intense silence as her eyes fell slightly out of focus, drifting to somewhere far away-- somewhere he could not hope to follow. Sam shifted uncomfortably, clearing his throat. “Forgive me, your Grace, but what can I do for you?”

Snatched from her spell, the Queen flinched, only a little, before turning her eyes back to him. “Tell me, my Lord, how is that you found yourself befriended by our Lord Snow?”

Sam shifted at that, shrugging a shoulder. “We’re brothers,” he replied with some enthusiasm. The Queen simply looked at him, perplexed. “In the Night’s Watch I mean,” he clarified quickly, “but as good as all the same.” He paused, gathering his thoughts. “Jon helped me when I first arrived at The Wall… I mean no offense, your Grace, when I say that I was a right bloody coward. But Jon protected me, although he didn’t have to.” The Queen smiled at this, fond and sweet and so very knowing. “Jon and I-- well, we’ve been through a lot together. An awful lot, your Grace. He’s saved my life a time or two. But, believe it or not I’ve saved his as well.” He spread his hands at his sides, a bit helpless. “How could we not become friends, after all that?”

Daenerys took a step closer to him and he had to fight every instinct to not take a step back. “I do not know the Lord Snow well,” she said, her voice quiet and halting. It was the same type of voice he always heard from Edd when he tried to lie. Edd was always an awful liar. “But he strikes me as a fast friend.”
Sam nodded. “Aye, he is, your Grace. The fastest.” He frowned at that, wringing his hands. “I don’t mean the fastest as in he can run fast-- though I suppose he is--”

“How did you come to find yourself at The Wall, Lord Tarly?” The Queen asked briskly, cutting short his nervous rambling-- much to his immense relief. “The Tarlys are a feared house in the realm. I do not think such a lofty family would send a son into the lifelong service of the Night’s Watch on a whim.”

Sam felt himself deflate at that, looking down at his feet and remembering, cruelly, the last encounter he had with his father. How the deep lines of disgust surrounding the man’s eyes had stood out bold as brass as he looked at him-- as if regarding a nasty tick he had only just discovered on his prized warhorse. “Well, if you want the truth of it, your Grace, I was not sent there to bring glory to my house.” He said with a nervous laugh. The Queen stood, patient and silent in front of him. “I was sent there to be forgotten, your Grace. My father… well, he never loved me. He offered me a choice-- take the Black or die-- so that the son he truly loved may inherit his house.”

Daenerys stepped back from him, astonished and disgusted in equal measure. “Who would do such a thing to their own son?”

Sam tilted his head, emitting a mirthless chuckle. “You clearly haven’t met my father.” Sam watched as the same shuttered expression he had glimpsed earlier in the Hall claimed her once more. She folded her hands in front of her and looked at him with a level gaze.

“Tell me, Lord Tarly, what have you heard of me?”

Sam shook his head in excitement. “Oh all kinds of things, your Grace. Though, to be true, some do not speak so kind of you and your family, but I never could believe them. Not after knowing maester Aemon.”

The Queen turned back to him, her brow crinkled in question. “Maester… Aemon?”

Sam felt a cold and sudden rush of regret wash over him, mentioning the old maester to her in such a careless manner. “Yes, your Grace,” he answered nervously. “Aemon was maester at Castle Black. He was… well he was a Targaryen… your great-great-great uncle, I believe. Something like that at any rate.” He trailed off with an unsure shrug as the woman before him turned away, a flash of defeat and grief evident on her face before she could hide it again. “He was one of the greatest men I ever knew,” he said, voice quiet and sad.
“Was?” She asked with only the slightest hitch in her voice.

Sam nodded, blinking his sudden tears back. “He died about a year ago.” He stepped closer to her, anguished at the looseness of his tongue. “I am sorry, your Grace. Really.” He took a steadying breath. “He spoke of you many times. He wanted nothing more than to help you.”

The Queen looked at him from over her shoulder, her eyes blank and flat. “I never knew,” she whispered darkly. “I never knew… I always thought I was the last of my house.” Her voice was laced with a deep and persistent loneliness-- a sorrow that stained her very bones. Sam recognized it-- it was the same darkness that resided within Jon when he spoke of his family… the family he never truly belonged to. “And he died before I could reach him,” she spat bitterly, turning her face away from him again. He longed to tell her of what he knew then-- to spill out his dark secrets so that she may take comfort in the knowledge that she was not alone in this world-- that the last of her family lay hidden beneath her very nose.

Sam mentally shook himself, damning his soft heart. “I am sorry, your Grace. I did not mean to upset you.”

The Queen shook her head, turning around to face him fully. “No, it is quite alright, Lord Tarly. I am glad you have told me.”

“Confess?” He repeated incredulously. He licked his lips and looked around the room, searching for some sort of answer hidden in one of its dark corners. “Your Grace I am sorry, but perhaps you should see the Septon… or maybe take a trip to the Godswood. It’s really a wonder-- very beautiful. I can take you there if you--”
“Samwell Tarly,” the Queen said, voice echoing off the stony walls. He stilled, the breath leaving him in a sudden rush of fear. “I have called you here to confess my sins against you and your family.” Sam simply blinked at her, utterly lost. She paced in front of him, holding her head high. “I have had to do terrible things to return to my home… to save my people, to ensure my own survival. Do you understand?” Sam nodded dumbly, still unsure of what to make of this display, the heat of her gaze searing him as good as a brand. “Many of these things have come to haunt me, and more still are yet to come, I am sure of it.” Her eyes were overbright, blazing like a hungry fire. “But burning two traitors from a secondary house in the Reach was never a sin I thought would fill my heart with the blackness I feel now.”

Sam felt himself go cold, all of his blood seemingly dropping to his feet. “Wha-- what are you…?”

She continued her harried pacing, looking all the world like a woman galloping towards a cliff, unable to find the reins no matter how she grappled. “I ordered their execution-- your father and brother. I gave your father a choice-- fire or fealty and he... he chose. And your brother stood with him.”

“Fire?” Sam choked, reaching out clammy palms to the door post behind him to steady himself.

“Dragonfire. It’s-- it’s much quicker. Hotter,” she nearly gasped, pressing a hand to her mouth, these defenses proving paltry things in the face of what she now realized she had done.

Sam looked up at her, having slowly sunk to the floor outside of his awareness. His hands hung limp from atop his knees. His mind roiled with thoughts innumerable, his heart warring bitterly with his lungs as he sat feeble and spent upon the dirty floor. He watched her as she watched him. The carefully sealed and armored facade of Queen Daenerys Targaryen had been entirely scrubbed away. Who stood before him now was naught but a frightened woman, and he could not begin to understand why. “Your Grace,” he began, voice as unsteady as an unsure colt. “Why… why do this?”

The Queen shook her head, blinking hard against something he could scarcely comprehend. “Your father betrayed his liege lady. They joined my enemies. They would not--”

“No, your Grace… why do this?” He asked, circling the room with a wave of a finger. “Why bring me in here? Why tell me these things?”

She looked at him, wide eyed and pale-- thoroughly shaken by the question. “I felt you should
know,” she replied tightly.

Sam nodded, struggling upright to stand once more. “Aye, you're right,” he said heavily as he searched her face, desperate for an answer. “But you didn't have to tell me. Even if you thought I should know… you could have had anyone else... you’re a Queen.”

“I aim to be a different sort of ruler, Sam,” she returned, voice strangely soft. “I felt it the right thing to tell you. In person.”

Sam looked at her for a long moment-- considering, weighing. He was not sure what the punishment was for being too forward with a Queen and did not have the mind to find out just yet, but if he was known for anything, it was his inability to shut his damn mouth. “It's not the only reason,” he said slowly, glancing at her uneasily as he fidgeted with the lacings on his jerkin.

She stepped closer to him, her eyes heated with a strange and savage light. “I ask for forgiveness.”

“Why?” He asked, disbelieving. “As you said… you've done many terrible things to get here. Have you… well have you sought forgiveness from every family of those you've killed?” She looked at him and her face was… oddly sad. Understanding, almost. He couldn’t help but feel an immense relief-- he had feared she would turn on him in anger. “Forgive me, your Grace, I do not mean it as criticism. But… why now? Why me?”

She huffed a small, defeated breath, as if she had meant to fight him on it, had meant to give him a royal answer rather than the truth-- but simply did not have the strength left for all of that any longer. “I killed the father and brother of my only ally’s dear friend,” she said, her voice almost unbearably sad, her eyes looking dangerously overbright. “Our fast friend Jon Snow.” She smiled at him, a weak and wavering thing like the broken string on a lute. “I cannot bear to think that I may have betrayed him. I cannot bear to think of what may happen when he hears of it.” She shook her head, just once, glancing fearfully over at him as a tear escaped from her. Even with her tenuous hold on her composure, she looked terrible and beautiful all the same.

The weight of what he suddenly knew settled on him like manacles and the mighty heft of it drew the breath from his lungs. He took a tiny step forward, his breath shallow, his limbs weak. “I had no love for my father, your Grace,” he said, his voice frail. “My brother… I did not condemn him, though maybe I should have. He never dared defy my father. Even as he plotted my death.” He looked away, taking a great, gasping breath. “Jon will not forsake you for this, your Grace. I am sure of it.”

The Queen shook her head, barking a single, bitter laugh. “He protects his friends.”
Sam nodded. “Aye, he does.”

“So who am I, Samwell Tarly, to be the exception to this rule? This rule held fast by the most stubborn man I ever hope to meet?”

“Because you did this,” he said nodding to her, the room at large. “This is not the sort of thing tyrants do.” He sighed, suddenly weary to his bones. “I cannot tell you that I forgive what you did, though I may understand it. The only thing that troubles me, your Grace, is the safety of my mother and sister. They are the only family I’ve ever really known—until I came to The Wall.” He shook his head, bereft and stunned. “I am a man of the Night’s Watch now. I have no family but those that stand at The Wall.”

The Queen straightened, the countenance of a ruler gathering around her once more. “I will send my bloodriders to the Reach at once.”

Sam shook his head furiously at that. “You can’t send half your guard away from you, your Grace. You need them—”

“What need do I have for them here?” She asked him fiercely. “To protect me from the ambitions of some lowly foot soldier while I stay among the family of a fierce ally? While I am not only under the watchful eyes of Brienne of Tarth and Ser Jorah, but also of the King’s Direwolf and my own dragon?” She shook her head furiously. “No, they will ride south tomorrow. They will meet the rest of the Khalasar upon the road and pick out fifty men from their number and they will see that no harm comes to your family.”

Sam looked at her, slack-jawed and wide eyed. “Your Grace, that is very generous of you, but I cannot accept that.” He stepped away, his head swaying in dissent and sudden determination. “I will ride South myself and—”

“And do what, my Lord?” She returned coldly. “Defend them against brigands with a horse cart?” Sam stilled at that, shoulders falling in defeat. “Besides, Jon Snow needs you here more than in the Reach.” She looked away from him, some of the frigid air she had conjured during their talk falling away. “This is not a gift for you to decline or accept,” she said softly, “This is a command. A price to be paid for my sin, my friend. I can only hope that it can somehow mend the mistakes I have made.”

Sam nearly reeled where he stood. He opened and closed his mouth several times before managing
a weak “thank you”.

She turned around to face him fully, a tiny, tender smile lighting her face. “Thank you, my friend, for speaking to me truly.” She emitted a tiny, humorless chuckle. “I am so often surrounded by liars and flatterers it is hard to find true counsel.” She cast her eyes to the floor, her mouth downturned in a line of exasperated fondness. “I have found the people that surround Jon Snow to be terrible liars. It is quite refreshing,” she said with a secret smile. Sam shrugged uselessly, not knowing how to respond. “I can see why Jon finds your company so valuable, Samwell Tarly, and I can only dare to hope to prove myself as worthy.”

“I think you’re doing a bloody good job of it so far, your Grace,” he managed past the large lump that suddenly occupied his throat.

The Queen smiled, walking to stand next to him and offered her arm. “I heard they are serving lemon cakes for dessert.”

Sam hesitated, disbelieving, before taking up her arm with a wide grin and leading them from the larder.

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With everything considered, she thought the supper had been an altogether successful affair.

Most of their guests were now filtering out, the Queen having taken her leave, looking wrung out and exhausted— which Sansa could not very well blame her for. Arya walked up to her place in the high seat and sat down lazily in the chair that had previously been occupied by the Queen. “Well that was more boring than I had hoped,” her sister said with a sigh.

Sansa glanced at her with an amused smile. “Is that not a good thing?”

Arya shrugged, choosing not to respond and looking away. They were quiet for a time as Sansa watched various attendants clear the plates and goblets away. “What do you think happened with Sam and the Queen?” Arya asked after some time, picking at her jerkin.

“I really don’t know,” Sansa replied, “It is strange— what would Queen Daenerys of the house Targaryen want with Samwell Tarly of the Night’s Watch?” She asked, looking over at her
Arya shrugged again. “Sam is Jon’s best friend.”

“So you think she dragged him into a larder to reminisce about Jon’s time at the Wall?”

“Don’t know,” Arya said shortly, “But it is interesting.”

Sansa looked down at the table, considering. She made a mental note to ask Sam about it later. She peered over at her sister, slouched happily in her chair, looking wholly unworried. “How can you be so… relaxed about all this?”

Arya blinked at her. “About what?”

Sansa’s eyes widened as she waved to the room at large. “About this. About a Targaryen in our home. A dragon over our heads. How are you so… so indifferent?”

Arya turned her face towards her, looking as serene as ever. “You’ve always been a worrier.”

Sansa opened her mouth to protest, but was cut short when the door to the Hall opened with a clang. She stopped short at the sight of Tyrion Lannister stepping slowly into the room. “My Lady,” he said quietly as he bowed. “May I have a word?”

Before she could even formulate a response, Arya was sat upright in her chair, her back straight as a plank, her hand gripping the pommel of her sword. Sansa stilled her with careful fingers on her shoulder. “It’s alright,” she said to her calmly, though her blood rattled in her heart at the sight of him.

Arya glanced at her in question, before her eyes flitted back to the man standing in the doorway, looking lost and a bit sad. “Forgive her, my Lord,” Sansa said to him coldly.

Tyrion shook his head. “I need no apologies for a lady’s instinct to protect her sister.”
Sansa looked at the woman in question, giving her a reassuring nod. Arya nodded back, still looking unsure but trusting in her judgement. She rose and strode out without so much as a second glance at their guest.

“What can I do for you, Lord Tyrion?”

Tyrion stepped forward, eyes bouncing between the various servants that bustled about the room. “Is there somewhere else we could speak?”

Sansa looked down at her hands, willing herself to gather all her remaining strength to endure the conversation she suspected awaited her. She wanted nothing more than to send him away, to sink into a bath and be done with the day, but she knew that he would find her at a later, perhaps more inconvenient time. She looked back up at him, screwing a smile onto her face before rising and leading him through the halls and into her study.

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Arya walked to the forge, her steps deliberately loud, her path straight and purposeful.

The night was cold, the castle quiet-- restful in the wake of the clamor and bustle of the arrival of a Queen. Her breath turned misty white before her as the ground crunched beneath her boots.

She found him, sat on a bench with a strange, curved blade between his legs, honing it lovingly with a whetstone. The noise she had made to warn him of her arrival proved futile as he was lost in his studies, his brow crinkled in concentration.

“What is that?”

Gendry jumped up from the bench, lifting the blade over his head as he looked around for a wild moment. His eyes finally stilled on her, smirking at him knowingly. He huffed, irritated, sitting down again and continuing his work. *Stubborn ass* . “It’s a Dothraki arakh,” he said flatly as he ran a thumb over the edge.

She stepped closer, bending over him and the strange weapon he was so intent on. “Why is it curved like that?”
Gendry dropped the hand that he had been smoothing over the blade in exasperation. He did not look up at her. “It’s good for killing men while on horseback.”

Arya leaned back, trying very hard not to feel a deep stab of betrayal at his coldness. She held out her hand, filled with a cloth-wrapped parcel. “I brought you some food... from the Queen’s supper,” she said as he finally looked up at her, surprised. “Figured you’d like some real food, after the shit they serve in the yard.”

Gendry nodded in disbeliefing gratitude. He took the parcel from her eagerly, unwrapping it and breaking a loaf of brown bread open, sniffing it indulgently before taking a great tear from it with his teeth. “Thank you, my Lady,” he said thickly through his full mouth.

Arya kneeled down next to him, looking him fully in the face. “What did I say about calling me a lady?”

Gendry laughed at that, tilting the loaf he held at her. “You said not to do it,” he tore off another chunk, chewing like a contented dog. “I believe you knocked me right down on my ass too.”

Arya grinned wickedly. “I don’t think you’d be smiling if I did that to you now.”

Gendry nodded as he stood, walking over to the workbench, spreading his gift upon it and sniffing the wedge of cheese, the roasted elk. He looked over his shoulder at her after a long bout of silence. “Why are you here?”

Arya could not help the flush of rage that washed over her at that. Why was she here? How could he ask such a question? She frantically tamped the fury down, packing it away behind her heart for a later time. “I came to commission a sword,” she replied tightly.

He raised his eyebrows at that, looking faintly disappointed as he turned away to look at his bounty again. “It’s a bit late for that, don’t you think?”

She strode forward to stand beside him. “It’s for the Queen.”

Gendry shook his head at that. “The Queen would not be able to lift a proper sword, let alone
swing it.”

She pulled out a rolled parchment from her belt and handed it to him. He took it and unrolled it, peering at it through the dim light curiously. “I did not know you could draw so well.”

“The Queen cannot wield something as brutal and heavy as a great sword,” Arya said, ignoring his praise of her artistry. “But she can dance with a blade like this.”

Gendry nodded, rolling the parchment back up. “You must love her, to commission a blade as fine as that.”

Arya tilted her head at him. “Can you do it?”

Gendry looked at her, vaguely offended. “Of course I can. I’ll start on it first thing tomorrow.”

“Good,” Arya replied. She looked at him for a moment before bowing her head. “Why did you not find me when you arrived?”

Gendry shrugged, looking every bit as uncomfortable as when she had discovered him earlier that day. “I thought it would be wise not to trouble you.”

Arya couldn’t help it, her poorly packed away rage sparked into something furious and inescapable at these useless, petty words. She struck out at him, shoving him hard in the shoulder. “Trouble me?” She shouted as he looked at her, astounded. “You think the return of a dear friend I thought lost forever would trouble me?”

“My Lady, I meant no off--”

“I am no lady!” She snarled.

“Arya,” he corrected somewhat desperate in the wake of her wroth. “I did not think my presence here of any importance to you.”
Arya shook her head, violence itching up her spine. “How dare you? How dare you think—” She could not finish her sentence, her anger flaming into something that would swallow her whole as good as an undertow. She spat and could not help but take some grim, childish satisfaction at the way he winced at her words. “After all we went through together you think it means nothing to me to see you again? I thought you were dead!”

Gendry stood before her, wilting within the heat of her gaze, the dark truth in her words. “You are a high-born lady, Arya. Finally delivered to the only place you ever wanted to go. With the only people you truly cared about.” The man sighed, deep and long, the whole of him deflating as he collapsed on a nearby bench. He rubbed a tired hand over his face before looking up at her. His blue eyes glowed with the heat of sorrow and her righteous anger could not help but break in the face of it, just a little. “I am a bastard, Arya. A bastard to a king, aye, but what has that done for me? What has that done for you?” He looked at her at this, his face inhabited by something fierce and old that had simmered within him for an age. “Because the man who squirted me into my mother’s belly just happened to be Robert Baratheon, dozens of children—babes Arya—died. Slaughtered. Because of who I am Yorren died. And Yorren was the only thing that stood between us and Harrenhal.” He sighed again, the weight of his words and the pain of memory sapping him of his considerable strength. He put his head in his hands, miserable.

She came to sit next to him, arms folded tightly in her lap lest they betray her and reach out to him. “Because of who my father was— I abandoned you… for the words of a sorceress.” He looked over at her, his face dark and terrible. “I figured you would hate me, leaving you there like that.”

She sat, silent and still for a time, willing her jaw straighter, her hands steadier, within the unforgiving wake of his words. “You always were a bloody idiot,” she muttered darkly.

Gendry grinned at this, emitting a quiet, knowing laugh. “I don’t know how to read or how to cook or pluck a chicken,” he said as he looked down at his boots. “But I sure do know how to piss you off.” Arya barked a laugh and before she knew quite what was happening, they both found themselves lost in helpless chuckles.

They stilled, after a time, and she leaned closer to him, folding him in her arms as she so desperately wanted to do when she had first saw him earlier that day. “I’m glad to have you back,” she whispered.

She felt as Gendy’s arms came about her, tightening to an almost uncomfortable level. “Aye,” he croaked into her hair.

They stayed like that for some time.
Sansa set about lighting some lanterns when they entered, stoking the dying fire in the hearth. She indicated a chair and Tyrion sat down, watching her worriedly the whole while. After the chamber was lit and warm to her satisfaction she closed the door and sat behind her desk, piled high with books of accounting, rolls and rolls of parchment, quills and wax and ink-- she was never as tidy as her mother had always wished.

“Now, what can I do for you Lord Tyrion?”

Tyrion’s face seemed pinched, as if looking at her caused him some form of physical pain. “I am glad to see you safe, my Lady.”

Sansa looked down at her hands, picking mindlessly at a cuticle. “Thank you,” she said quietly. “I was relieved when I learned of your escape.”

Tyrion barked a disbelieving laugh at that. “Well that is something I did not expect to hear.”

Sansa looked at him, her face flat and impassive. “And what did you expect, my Lord? For me to wish you dead?”

Tyrion looked a bit abashed at this, glancing away. “Something like that,” he muttered.

Sansa felt oddly hurt at his presumption. She resented being married off to Tyrion-- whose family had strived to all but exterminate her own. But she never came to hate Tyrion himself… not truly at any rate. She wrongfully blamed him for the unhappy consequences of their marriage, but she could never bring himself to hate him. “I was unhappy, my Lord, being married to you. But I never hated you so much as to wish you dead for a crime I knew you to be innocent of.” Tyrion managed a small, ironic smile. “Now, my Lord, what is it that I can do for you?” she asked again, her tone hinting at no small amount of impatience.

Tyrion seemed to ignore this inquiry, much to her chagrin. “Are you happy? Truly?”

She was still for a moment, shock coursing through her like a cold wind. “What business is it of yours that I am happy?”
Tyrion smiled, shaking his head as if to clear it from an obnoxious pest. “I am still your husband--”

“You are not,” she said quickly, fiercely.

“I am--”

“I was married to Ramsay Bolton,” she snarled, hands flat on the desk as she stood.

“Aye, while still married to me,” he said with raised eyebrows. “Your marriage to Ramsay was never a true--”

“We never consummated!” She shouted. “Our marriage was never official in the eyes of the gods.”

Tyrion’s mouth worked and he fidgeted with his hands. “Yes, well, the eyes of the gods are those of septons. No septon was called to inspect your maidenhead nor to properly annul our--”

Sansa, having been pacing in rage and confusion wheeled on him, eyes hot with a furious fire. “So is this what you came here for, my Lord? To drag me off to your chamber to finish it?”

The corner of Tyrion’s mouth quirked up at that. “I don’t think Lord Varys would take to kindly to--”

“Are you to complain to me about your chambers as well?”

Tyrion shook his head, looking properly discomfited. “I think we got off on the wrong foot.”

Sansa leaned her hands on her desk, looking at the man murderously. “And what foot were we on to start with, my Lord? The one where you came to me in my home to stake a claim? Or is there another one I’m unaware of?”

“The one where I tell you that the Queen may grant us an annulment.” He looked at her with a sad,
slightly adoring smile. “I have already spoken to her about it.” Sansa felt the heat of her fury blow away like so much ash in the wind. She sat heavily in her chair, stunned. “It is more of a formality, than anything else, but it does clear up any questions that may arise should you marry again.” Sansa looked over at him sharply at his last words, the reaction involuntary. “A septon would be reluctant to grant such a thing, seeing as though, well--” He stopped short, clearing his throat and shifting in his seat, unbearably distressed.

Sansa nodded, vaguely ashamed at her previous ranting. “Thank you, my Lord.”

Tyrion huffed a shocked breath. “As if I would do anything less.”

Sansa was quiet for a time, her mind locked in an endless tumult. “You were always kind to me, my Lord. I apologize for…” Her voice faltered and she glanced away. “There is one problem.”

Tyrion raised his eyebrows. “Oh?”

Sansa turned her eyes to him, suddenly as cold as when he had first presumed to request her audience. “The Queen is Queen in name only. She does not sit the Iron Throne. She has no authority to do such a thing.”

A pregnant silence greeted these words before Tyrion lifted his chin at her, a tiny, chilly smile flitting across his mouth. “Yet.”

“You have a lot of faith in this woman.”

“And why shouldn’t I? She is my Queen and and I am her Hand.”

“And you think my brother will win her her throne,” she replied flatly, picking up a stray quill and tapping it thoughtlessly upon the pitted surface of her desk.

Tyrion looked at her, crestfallen. “He told you.”

Sansa looked at him, affronted. “Of course he told me. I am his sister. I am the Lady of Winterfell.”
Tyrion smiled at her, swelling a bit, as if in pride. “That you are, Lady Stark.” His face fell into well-worn lines of weariness as he leaned back in his chair. “Who else have you told?”

“I hardly think that is any of your business.”

“That is where you’d be wrong,” Tyrion said, folding his hands in his lap and looking at her levelly. “I need to know exactly what to expect when the Northern lords come to call. I need to properly advise my Queen.”

Sansa leaned back in her chair heavily, looking away. “Well she is not my Queen, so I really don’t see why I should share something as sensitive as that.”

“She may not be your Queen yet, you’re right in that,” Tyrion returned hotly. “But she is your brother’s and your King’s ally, my Lady. You should be just as concerned as I am in this matter.”

Sansa felt herself grow hot, something wicked and petty jolting her to the very soles of her feet. “And why should I concern myself, my Lord? Jon will do just as he likes.” She felt ashamed as soon as the words left her mouth. She felt naught but a child, sat on the floor crying over a broken toy. The black weight of resentment that had brewed within her like a witch’s potion was now boiling over her heart.

Tyrion’s eyes turned somewhat kind… perhaps even a bit knowing at this. “Your brother left you with the North.”

“And he gave it away,” she replied darkly. “He gave it away almost as soon as he had it.”

“He would not be the first Stark to kneel to a Targaryen.”

“He is not a Stark!” She found herself nearly shouting, lunging forward from her chair. The words seemed to ring against the stones of the walls like ricochet, relaying back to her what she had just said like a cruel echo in a dark cave. She felt her skin grow clammy, her blood halt in her veins. She pressed a hand to her mouth, closing her eyes tight against her intolerable shame.

Tyrion peered at her, concern shading every line in his face. “He is every bit a Stark as you,” he
said quietly.

Sansa shook her head, willing the hateful tears away as she sat back in her chair fully. “Please, my Lord, forgive me,” she gasped. “I did not mean it.”

Tyrion offered her a wan smile that did little to comfort her. “It happens to the best of us, Lady Stark.”

Sansa shook her head, furious with herself. “Jon is a Stark in everything but name. I should not say such vile things.” She sniffed, looking back up at the other man. “Please, do not tell anyone of what I said.”

Tyrion nodded and they were both silent as she looked into the fire crackling merrily in the hearth. “I just-- I just wish he would listen to me.”

“And how would you have advised him in this matter?” Tyrion asked mildly.

She shook her head, at a loss. She let out small, humorless chuckle. “I really don’t know.” She looked over at him, a bit sad. “I guess I just-- I just wanted to be heard from, is all.”

Tyrion nodded slowly, looking thoughtful. “My Queen looks to me for advice,” he said with a sigh. “But I’d say she takes it barely half the time.” Sansa threw him a pointed glance, coming to realize their respective roles as running fairly well parallel to one another. Tyrion looked at her knowingly, eyebrows raised. “Oh yes, Lady Sansa, I cannot always talk myself into getting what I want. Most especially with Daenerys Targaryen.” He paused, looking over at her pensively. “I advised her not to go beyond the Wall,” he said, “Quite ardently actually. But she would not be dissuaded.”

Sansa felt the blood kick up in her again as she looked over at him, eyes flashing. “You would sentence my brother to death?”

Tyrion lifted his shoulders, wholly unworried. “Well, yes, of course.”

She lifted herself from her chair, taking herself from behind the desk to stand before him fully. He looked up at her, a small and easy smile on his face. “I’ve known you to be many things, my Lord. A lecher, a drunk, even a fool, but I never knew you to be heartless.”
“I have been called worse, my Lady,” he responded coolly. “I advised against her going because it was what any advisor worth his salt would have done. It is what you would have done, if positions were reversed,” he said, inclining his head to her. She felt herself still at these words, though her heart still hammered in her chest. “But she went anyway. And your brother is alive because of it. And here we are,” he said, unclasping his hands and indicating the room at large with a small, bitter smile. “My Queen has one less dragon, but one more steadfast allegiance that proves more priceless with every passing day.” Sansa looked down at him, wholly unsure of how to respond. He gazed up at her, eyes shining with a deep understanding. “So tell me, my Lady. Should Jon Snow have asked you to bend the knee to Daenerys Targaryen, would you have given him your blessing?”

“No,” Sansa replied, dark and breathless.

Tyrion smiled at her sadly at that. “I would not have either, my Lady. But sometimes advisors are best not listened to.”

Silence reigned for a long while, Sansa eyes and thoughts trapped by the endless dancing of the flames in the hearth. “I have not told any of the lords about Jon bending the knee,” she murmured. Tyrion huffed a small breath of relief at that, but said nothing. Sansa turned back to him and he offered her a small, grateful smile. “You seem pleased.”

Tyrion shifted out of his chair, taking a few steps towards her and reaching for her hand. She gave it after a second's hesitation. He pressed his lips to her knuckles before looking up at her and pressing her palm between both his own. Something like pride flared in his eyes when he looked at her then. “I always knew you would be good at this.”

With a final squeeze of her hand, he turned and left the room without another word.

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“You’re sure of this?”

Davos nodded, his brow wrinkled in worry. “Aye, your Grace. The storm’ll put them out at least two days, if not more.”

Dany turned to look out at the yard of Winterfell, watching men hauling bales of barley into
storerooms, women shifting through with pails of water and milk. She placed her hands on the rail of the gangway, as much to steady her as to hide their tremble. “This is maddening,” she said, voice pitched low in frustration.

Davos took a step closer from his place behind her. “Aye, your Grace, I suspect it is. But you shouldn’t worry. Jon Snow and all the tough sons of bitches that follow him are well accustomed to winter storms.”

“My Unsullied are less accustomed, my Lord,” she replied darkly. She leaned her forearms on the rail, sighing. “I should be with them.”

“For what purpose, your Grace?” Davos asked. “So you can shiver under your cloak right along with them?”

“They are my people, Ser Davos, they are under my protection and I cannot protect them if I am here.”

Davos nodded, stepping to join her at the rail. “Aye, and they’re under Jon Snow’s protection now.”

She glanced over at the man, who returned her gaze with kindness in his eyes. She had grown frightfully fond of the paternal company of Ser Davos during their travels, and especially now during her lonely sojourn at Winterfell. She smiled, looking down at her hands. “I do not think I can thank you enough, Ser Davos,” she finally said, turning to face him more fully. “I know how much it means for you to separate yourself from your King. Your company has proven as useful as it is bracing.”

Davos shook his head. “It is nothing, your Grace. Besides, who am I to refuse the order of my King?”

She looked sharply at the man at that. “Jon told you to do this?”

Davos nodded, looking a bit chagrined, as if he had revealed too much. “Aye, your Grace. He all but commanded me. I refused at first. Not out of any ill towards you, your Grace, but because I believe that my place is beside my King. The last time I left a King I served he ended up getting himself killed. Not that I think that will happen to Jon Snow, your Grace,” he finished hastily, after noticing the stricken look that manifested on her face at his words. “But he insisted.” He raised a
shoulder, helpless. “And you know what a stubborn ass he can be, your Grace.”

Dany turned her face away, staring blankly to the yard again, trying to find some sort of understanding. “Then why would you lead me to believe it was all your idea, Ser?”

Davos fidgeted with his hands a bit, unable to meet her gaze. “I know that you said you don’t appreciate being lied to, your Grace. And it was never my intention to do so, but my King commanded discretion.”

“And why would he request such a thing? It seems to me to be a trivial thing to lie about,” she replied, her voice taking on an edge of anger and frustration.

“Begging your pardon, your Grace, but would you have accepted me knowing it was the King’s idea?” Davos ventured cautiously.

Dany looked over at the other man, startled as she realized what the answer to that question would be. She of course would fight Jon tooth and nail for sending his only advisor and friend from his side for the fraught journey up the King’s Road. She couldn’t help the fond smile and astonished chuckle that escaped her as she shook her head. “Your King knows me better than I would have thought.”

Something damning and so very understanding bloomed in Davos’ eyes at that. Dany was not certain how it made her feel so she simply turned to look back out in the yard, trying very hard-- as she had for the past four days-- to acclimate to this strange country. It proved more difficult than she had initially hoped. Her dragon’s blood kept her usually warm in the frosty climes of the North, this was true, but she also had to accustom herself to knocking slush from her boots before she entered the castle, of keeping her hood up during the snow flurries so that her hair would not become soaked as soon as she sat in front of a fire. The very earth was different-- gray and unyielding and brutal-- much like the people that lived upon it. Even the air was different-- the earthy smell of woodsmoke laced by the otherworldly smell of snow. There was something rough and sweet about it all at once. Snow was of the heavens, and there was an abundance of it here. The poetry of this world made of hard ice and soft snow that Jon called home was not lost on her.

Trapped in thought, she did not notice Davos reaching out and touching a soft hand to her elbow. She flinched, only a little. “We best be getting to the Great Hall, your Grace. Lady Mormont will be arriving soon.”

Dany nodded, following the man to their destination. “You’re sure of this plan?” She asked as she lifted the skirt of her plain, black dress as they descended the stairs.
“Aye, your Grace,” the man answered, looking about the yard warily as they crossed through. Davos rarely ever wore a sword, but he did so now. Most of the men and women bustling about the yard took little notice of her, either out of lack of recognition because of her drab garb, or out of general distraction in their work. Some stopped to bow and still others stopped to offer her a dark glare. “The North is not fond of southerners, as you might have guessed,” he muttered to her under his breath. “They’ve felt spat upon by Southerners for years. As such, they balk at the finery and trappings of the South and its rulers. They do not do well with ceremony, or long listings of titles, or the large companies of Queens. It is much better this way, I assure you.”

Dany nodded, a thrill of anxiety coursing through her at his words.

They slowed as they reached the doors of the Great Hall. He turned to look at her, smiling in the wholly confident, reassuring way he always did. “I’ve wrangled with Lyanna Mormont before, your Grace. She knows me, and though she’s just as prickly as the rest of them, she loves Jon Snow. I’ll be right there with you, your Grace. Don’t you worry.”

Dany smiled at him, hopelessly grateful for his kindness, his trueness. She grasped his shoulder and stood on her toes, leaning forward to brush a kiss on his whiskered cheek. The man was red to the roots of his hair when she pulled away. “Thank you, my Lord. You’re a true friend.” The man fidgeted, looking properly chuffed, and pushed the doors open for her.

“I’ll announce her once she arrives,” he said to her with an encouraging nod. “Now go, Lady Stark is waiting on you.”

She offered him one last smile and stepped through. The Lady of Winterfell sat at one of the long trestles that bordered the room, rather than at the high table. Cold, gray light flooded through the windows on either side, casting motes of silver dust upon the floor. Sansa looked up from the scroll she had been studying and stood, curtsying. “Your Grace,” she greeted with a tired smile.

“My Lady,” she returned with a bow of her head. “This room looks much different in the daylight,” she observed, turning her head about the sparse and cold Great Hall.

The Lady of Winterfell took up her seat again. “Aye, it’s much uglier,” she replied with a hint of jest.

Dany was about to reply when she noticed Ghost sniffing a patch of floor some feet in front of where Sansa now sat, scribbling away at her scroll. She stepped towards the wolf, who grew more
agitated with every whiff. She knelt down next to him and saw a dark stain upon the planks, a dull and sullen crimson that was unmistakable.

“That is the blood of Lord Petyr Baelish,” Sansa called from her seat, her voice detached and cold. Dany looked up at her, surprised. She had not known that the woman had noticed her examinations. Dany stood, turning towards the other woman with her hands folded in front of her. “I ordered his execution right here in this hall,” the Lady of Winterfell intoned, something black and perilous lacing her words. “His blood serves as a warning to others who mean to betray me or my family.”

Dany could not help the frigid chill that ran down her spine like the drip of snowmelt. Dany had been threatened too many times to not recognize one as poorly veiled as that. She cleared her throat, stepping forward. “Tell me, my Lady, what were the nature of this Lord’s crimes?”

Sansa grinned in a feral sort of way. “He orchestrated the downfall of my house. The murder of my father. He sold me like a brood mare to a demon.”

Dany inclined her head. “I am sorry, my Lady, to hear of all the cruel things that have befallen your family. From what I have come to know so far, I can only suspect that no house was ever more undeserving of such crimes.”

Sansa looked at her, face shuttered. “I thank you, your Grace, for your sympathies,” she said as icily as the frost that clung to the panes of the windows. She took up her quill again, ignoring her.

“I was sold too, you know,” Dany stated coolly as she slowly made her way around the table. She heard the scratching of the woman’s quill still at her words. “My own brother brokered the deal. He told me with some pride that he’d let the Khal, the khalasar and all their horses fuck me if it gave him an army.” Sansa peered over at her, reluctant interest blooming in her face. “But here we are.” Dany strode closer, lowering onto the bench next to her, Sansa’s eyes following her the whole way. “We are women. Our fates are too often taken from our hands by fool men and fool ambitions.”

Sansa looked away, licking her lips. “My father was no fool man. His only ambition was the safety of his family. His only foolishness was trusting in the wrong house.” The woman stilled, looking at the dark stain upon the planks. “Littlefinger was not foolish. But his ambition made him blind and I made certain he paid the price.” Sansa looked back at her, pale eyes shaded with something deep and fateful. Her jaw was clenched tight. “No man—or woman—will decide my fate for me again.”
Dany smiled, a bit cold, a bit knowing, but said nothing.

Sansa leaned toward her, just a fraction, looking as fierce as any wolf in the wood. “Tell me, your Grace. What is it that you want? Why are you here? What do you want from my brother? From my family?”

Dany had suspected this coming. Even after the handsome gift of her coal-black cloak, she saw that the Lady of Winterfell was an adept politician. And politicians only worked with facts. Her younger sister, Arya, trusted with her gut, with her heart. Sansa trusted only with her mind.

Dany shifted back into her seat, brushing a stray bit of wolf’s hair from her dress. “All my life I’ve only wanted to return home,” she said simply.

The woman next her leaned back, taken aback, waiting for more. “Home?” Dany inclined her head in agreement. “Forgive me, your Grace, but Winterfell is not your home.”

She shook her head. “No, it is not.”

“Then what are you doing here? Why come here to Westeros with armies and dragons and treat with Queen Cersei?”

Dany smiled, a small and bitter thing. “Your brother told me very little about how you won your home back, Lady Stark, but I suspect the motivations are similar to mine now. Something threatens my home and I aim to see that threat destroyed.” She nodded to the dark stain on the floor and Sansa looked from it to her, looking pensive. “I will not squabble with Cersei Lannister over a chair that sits upon a mountain of the dead.” Sansa fell still and silent, looking shocked and pensive in equal measure.

“I know the troubles that haunt your mind, Lady Stark. I know you must doubt that, but I do… better than most.” She leaned forward, chancing a hand on the woman’s wrist. She did not flinch. “I have seen the destruction of my house, I have dealt killing blows to those who may betray me. I have seen the ones I love fall by the score into the hands of my enemies.” She squeezed her fingers over the thin lines of Sansa’s wrist. “My only intention with your people, your family, is to protect them and see those that may wish them harm dead before they can lift their blades.” She leaned back, and Sansa sighed, long and trouble. Dany looked to Ghost, now gnawing on a stray bone in the corner.
Sansa shook her head, still trapped by incredulity. Dany understood her reluctance, although that did not stop her growing impatience. She was well used to the hesitations from men who saw her only as a woman that needed a good scolding and a strong hand to be brought to heel. She was not as familiar with the same consternation coming from a woman-- especially a woman in a seat of power, in a home that she had to claw back from the clutches of enemies. “I know that you intend to march South after this war is won, your Grace,” she said, unable to keep the bitterness from her voice. “And you aim to take my brother and his armies with you when you do it.”

Dany looked over at her. “You’re a politician, Lady Stark,” she said a bit coldly. “Do you recall anyone entering into an alliance without expecting something in return?” Sansa simply stared back at her, defiant. Dany turned her face away again, sifting on the uncomfortable bench. “I did not force or threaten Jon Snow to enter into such a pact, if that is what you are thinking, my Lady.”

“Forgive me, your Grace, but I cannot help but doubt that.”

Dany’s eyes widened with shock. “You think me so cruel?”

“I do not know what I think,” Sansa said, defeated, as she turned away. “I don’t know you.”

Dany paused at this, licking her lips. “And do you think you know your brother?”

Sansa rounded on her, eyes wide. “Of course.”

Dany clenched her hands in order to wrest herself into some semblance of calm. “So why do you think Jon Snow bent the knee to me, then? If you know him so well.”

She watched as the woman’s face fell, her eyes drifting. “Because... because it was the right thing to do.” Sansa slouched in on herself, beaten. She looked down at her ink-stained hands, fiddling nervously. “It’s always what Jon does. The right thing.” The two women lapsed into a thick and thoughtful silence for a time. “Forgive me, your Grace. I have had much to think about these past weeks.”

“I well know the stresses of ruling, Lady Stark. It is an arduous thing,” Dany responded gently. “You have winter at your door, an army to feed and supply, a stranger to welcome to your home. And you are not blessed with a team of advisors to share the load, like myself.” She leaned forward, reaching for the pitcher of ale before her and pouring a horn of it. “I am not your enemy, Lady Stark, though I respect your skepticism. I cannot say that I would not do the same if in your
position, but we can only win this fight if we work together,” she said in earnest as she passed her the cup.

Sansa shook her head, a small smile lighting her face. “I never much liked the taste of ale, your Grace.”

Dany returned her smile, placing the cup back down. “That’s something we can agree on, Lady Stark.”

Sansa’s smile widened and she nodded to the empty Hall before them. “I would have wine, but Lyanna Mormont will have none of it.”

“You’re a proper host, my Lady,” Dany answered, feeling a bit relieved that, at least for now, they had come to some small peace. “When can we expect Lady Mormont?”

“Any time now,” Sansa said, her voice growing darker. “I suspect that she means to keep us waiting.”

Dany inclined her head. “I have heard tell of these prickly Northern Lords and Ladies.”

Sansa emitted a mirthless chuckle. “And she’s the prickliest among them.”

Dany raised her eyebrows at this, missing Jon all the more with every passing moment. “What can I expect from this Lady Mormont?”

Sansa shifted in her chair, a mirthless smirk twisting her mouth. “Well, to start with, your Grace, do not mention her age. She is only thirteen, but does not act it in the slightest.” Dany nodded, glad of this information. “But, she loves my brother and my family. She will have no such love for a foreign Queen with the name Targaryen.” Sansa looked at her then, with a confused crease to her brow-- regarding her much like someone would a book they had no place for on their shelf. “But, she will come around. She may never come to like you, but she will follow wherever Jon leads.”

“And you, Lady Stark,” Dany said to her assuredly, a faint smile on her face.
Sansa smiled at her slowly.

They fell silent, slipping into a tense companionship. Whatever else, Dany had friends in Winterfell.

The silence grew tiresome as the minutes inched along. They waited for most of the morning. Dany was nearly nodding off where she sat when the doors finally sprung open and in strode a stony-faced girl and two equally solemn guards. Davos ran in behind them, looking winded and ruffled. “My Lady, your Grace, Lady Lyanna Of House—“

“They bloody well know who I am, Seaworth” Lady Mormont spat. “Let’s get on with it.”

Davos bowed haltingly, unsure of what else to do. Dany and Sansa both stood, delayed in their shared shock. Dany nodded to Davos and he shuffled hurriedly to his place beside her.

“Lady Mormont,” Sansa greeted with a tight smile and an even tighter curtsy. “I hope the roads found you well.”

Lyanna simply glared at her before turning her eyes upon Dany, her lip curled as if she had just noticed shit upon her boot.

“My Lady, this is Queen Daenerys Targ—”

“Targaryen ,” Lyanna all but growled.

Dany felt a snap of outrage that, thrumming to the soles of her feet. She bowed her head shallowly, folding her hands in front of her and trying not to clutch them too tightly. “It is an honor to meet you, Lady Mormont.”

The girl looked up at her, nonplussed. “Why should it be?” she asked. “My house is small and far from where ever you claim to come from.” Dany chose not to respond, staring back at Lyanna in what she hoped was a vaguely disinterested way. The girl looked around, spreading her hands at her sides. “This is the company to greet me? Where is your eunuch, Dragon Queen? Your father-killing dwarf? Or my coward cousin?”
“Lady Mormont, please,” Sansa entreated. “I know you must be tired from your journey...”

“We thought it best to meet you in private,” Dany provided bracingly as Sansa trailed off awkwardly. “We have much to speak of.”

Lyanna turned back to her, face twisted into a sour smirk. “Or you thought I would receive you better without your merry band of criminals.” A frosty silence pressed upon them before the girl in front of her nodded to Davos at her left. “I’m sure that was your idea, wasn’t it Seaworth?” The man tried to look impassive, but failed spectacularly. The girl smirked, almost approvingly. “Choosing to meet me by yourself, Dragon Queen, I can respect that,” she said as she began tugging off her gloves. “You may be a pretty southern Queen, but you have courage, if nothing else.” Dany felt oddly vindicated at her words, though she could not be certain why. Lyanna turned to her guards. “Off with you lot, us women have work to do.”

The two men bowed and trotted from the room. Lyana sat herself in front of them and Dany, Sansa, and Davos followed her lead. “Would you care for any ale, my Lady?” Sansa said graciously as she indicated the flagon in front of her.

“Where is my King?” Lyanna asked, ignoring the invitation for drink entirely.

“He marches to Winterfell with our armies,” Dany replied.

Lyanna lifted her eyebrows at that. “Our? Is it our already, Queen of Dragons? Are we to expect a royal wedding within the fortnight?”

Dany felt heat creep into her cheeks despite herself. Sansa looked over at her warningly and now Dany understood-- the Lady Mormont did not know of Jon bending the knee to her. Dany licked her lips, steadying herself. “He marches with my Unsullied and his bannermen. Our armies, as I said, Lady Mormont.” Dany could not help the coldness that crept into her voice at her words.

Tension crackled like an uncontrolled blaze in the air, all parties present seemingly waiting out the other to reach out and break it.

“And why not ride with your men, Dragon Queen? Are you so afraid of our country that you had to flee to the comfort of a castle so quickly?” Lyanna asked, her voice edged and mean.
Dany had to bite her lip to tamp her fury down, her ire growing like a thunderhead within her. She steadied herself, smiling at the girl as sweetly as she could. She knew Lyanna was testing her, prodding her like a questionable piece of meat on her plate. She knew this game well, and she was confident she would win. “I rode for two days and nights up the King’s Road, my Lady, with no heraldry and only a dozen in my company.” Lyanna leaned back at that, placing her hand upon her thigh and looking at her thoughtfully. “I know I am not welcome here, my Lady,” Dany continued and she felt Davos shift next to her. “But I intend to help you win this war all the same.”

A pregnant pause greeted her words and Lyanna regarded her much like Dany would look upon a deadly but beautiful snake she had happened upon on the road. “Targaryen is not a loved name in the North,” Lyanna said as she took up the once-ignored flagon on the table and poured herself a cup. She drank deeply and wiped her lips with the back of her wrist. “But neither is Snow.” Sansa shifted nervously, passing Dany an anxious look that she returned in kind. “I don’t know you, Dragon Queen. I can’t bring myself to rejoice that a Targaryen has come to Winterfell with foreign armies and foreign beasts, but I am not a fool. I know what faces us and what exactly winter will bring.” The girl leaned forward, placing her cup down and folding her hands on the table. “I heard what you did, beyond The Wall. I have men who venture to Mole’s Town now and again. I know what you did for my King and I know the price you paid to do it.” The girl looked down, taking a great and steadying breath as if readying herself to drink a poison. She glanced back up at her, reluctant acceptance inhabiting her young face. “I do not know how to repay the debt I owe for that, but I do know that my fellow Northmen will not see it like I do. They’re bloody fools, the lot of them. I can only pledge my voice for you in the shitstorm that awaits you once they all arrive, and what few swords I have left.”

Dany felt something rare and precious course through her veins at Lyanna’s words. “Thank you, my Lady,” she said with a nod of her head. “I don’t think you can know how much your loyalty means to me and your King.”

Lyanna smirked at her and there was a small, but heady pause as Dany and Lyanna looked at each other, both knowing and seeing the other in a way Dany thought near impossible when she had first heard of the precocious Lady of Bear Island.

Sansa cleared her throat, looking both stunned and pleased at this turn of events. “Well, shall we talk strategy then, my friends?”

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Sam stamped through the springy loam of the Godswood, knowing where he would find his friend at most hours of the day without needing confirmation.

And he found him, staring into the glassy surface of the pool next to the great Weirwood. He
strode forward, mind still in a tumult over what had transpired between him and the Queen the previous evening.

As he drew closer, he noticed the shadows that stained the hollows of Bran’s eyes, the lines of worry around his down-turned mouth. “Have you slept since I last saw you, my Lord?” Sam asked as he stopped beside his wheeled chair. “You look frightful, begging your pardon.”

Bran looked up at him, his eyes dark with troubles Sam could not begin to understand. “What do you have to tell me, Sam?”

He lowered his head, fidgeting. “Well, it’s about the Queen… and Jon.” Bran turned away, saying nothing. “I-- well, I think they may be in love.”

“They are,” Bran intoned flatly.

Sam shifted closer. “Well, I just-- I don’t know how what we know about Jon… I don’t know how well that will go over.”

“Not well, I suspect.”

Sam paused. “Do you think it wise to tell them? I mean-- of course we should tell Jon eventually, but I don’t know if right now is--”

“It doesn’t matter,” Bran cut across him, looking up at him with a hint of fear flashing in his dark eyes.

Sam gaped like a fish out of water for a moment. “Well… it does matter. An awful lot, actually--”

“There is something else the Queen and Jon must know about that is much more important.”

Sam halted at that, cold shock soaking into his bones. “Forgive me, my Lord, but what could possibly be more important than Jon being the rightful heir to the Iron Throne?”
Bran’s gaze hardened and something within his face chilled Sam to his very core. “Bring the Queen to me,” he said, “There is something I need to tell her.”

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Chapter End Notes 

I'm sorry. All I seem to write are doozies.

Tune in next week for Jon and Dany actually being in the same room.

(Thank you so, so much to SakuraBlossom and HardlyFatal for the desperately needed once-overs. Y'all are the best.)
The Wrath of a Mother

Chapter Summary

“How can a demon like that know about the wrath of a mother?” She turned her eyes back to her, an ancient and fundamental understanding passing between them like a current. “Way I see it, Your Grace, the Night King made a grave mistake, taking a child from the Mother of Dragons.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was fucking cold.

And he was only just now venturing into the Riverlands.

The ground was veiled in a thin shell of frost that crunched underfoot and his breath bloomed before him in short-lived clouds of steam as he hurried to build a fire for the night-- a frightfully difficult task with only one working hand, he found much to his dismay. He had only become marginally better at it with all the practice he had acquired over the days on the road. As he struggled and cursed with the flint, he wondered to himself-- not for the first time since leaving King’s Landing-- if he was actually mad. If it was this cold this far South he vaguely wondered why he should journey even farther North, where the weather would be just as frosty as his reception, he had no doubt.

He cursed under his breath again as the triumphant spark from his flint was promptly blotted out by a blast of cold wind. He sat back on his haunches, arms hanging heavy and defeated on his knees as he began to idly ponder the idea of a dramatic disguise so he may sneak into a feather bed at the inn he had spotted an hour down the track.

He lifted his hand again, tired and frustrated, to strike again, but stopped short at the unmistakable snap of a branch under foot, the damning crack of frost beneath a boot.

He swung around to the source of the sound, grabbing his sword that leaned against a nearby tree. He looked around, eyes straining in the twilight gloom, as he palmed the pommel. He leaned forward, straining his ears to hear more, slowly and soundlessly unseating the blade from its scabbard so as not alert his intruder.
He swung around again at the sound of more tramping through the brush. “What the bloody hells do you think you’re going to do with that, eh? Throw it at me?”

The familiar brogue of his friend sent Jaime nearly reeling back onto his ass and into the icy leaves. He sprang to his feet, taking in the man’s black-clad form as he emerged from the loam of the woods. His visitor stopped, regarding him with a smirk of fond disdain, thumbs tucked into his belt.

“Bronn?” Jaime gasped.

Bronn nodded, stepping forward to the cold pile of kindling. He looked at it, then back up at him with a disappointed sniff, before he crouched down and took up the flint that Jaime had dropped in his alarm. “Aye, that’s me,” Bronn replied as he struck the flint and blew onto the resulting spark, bringing the fire into impossible life in a matter of seconds.

Jaime’s shoulders fell as he sheathed his sword and leaned it against the tree again. He settled himself across from him, bewildered. “What in the Seven Hells are you doing here? How did you find me?”

Bronn barked a derisive laugh, shaking his head and poking the newly made fire before him with an obliging stick. “Let’s just say that you are unused to stealthy travel.”

Jaime swelled with some amount of offense, but knew better than to argue the point-- the man was bloody right, afterall. “Why are you here?”

Bronn shrugged, looking back up at him mildly. “You still owe me a castle.”

Jaime couldn’t help but huff out a laugh, shaking his head. “I think you know that I am in no position to grant you such a thing now.”

Bronn, satisfied with the health of the fire, leaned back and pulled out a small flask from his belt. He took a pull with a grimace before offering it to Jaime. He declined, still at a loss as to how the man was so cavalier about all of this.
“Why’s it always about you, eh?” Bronn asked as he stoppered his flask. “I’m not a bloody idiot. I
know better than to expect you to give me what I want now.” He tilted his head, looking at him
from across the fire with raised eyebrows. “No, I think I’ll put my money on this Queen and her
bloody dragons.”

“So, just that we’re clear,” Jaime said, shifting forward slightly in his incredulity, “you came after
me for the vague promise of a castle based on the generosity of a Queen you know nothing about?”

“You remember what I said to you, yeah? After I saved your sorry ass from being turned to soot?
No one gets to kill you but me.” Bronn said as he stood, walking away into the trees without a
further word. Several silent and queer moments passed, in which Jaime sat frozen in a persistent
stupor. He was nearly arriving at the conclusion that he had simply dreamed the whole exchange
when Bronn returned, leading his horse and pulling the limp form of a rabbit from a saddle bag.
“And no matter what you might think, Kingslayer,” the man continued as if nothing had happened,
“you’ll die out here without me.” He pulled out a knife from his boot and set about skinning his
prize. “You’re a stubborn son of a bitch, Jaime Lannister, so if you intend to ride North and join
this bloody fool Jon Snow and this-- Dragon Queen, I intend to see that you survive it.”

Jaime shook his head. “You’re a right mean bastard, Bronn. Here I was thinking you came for me
out of the goodness of your own heart.”

Bronn looked up at him, resting his elbow on his thigh and twirling his bloody knife. “I’ll take that
as a compliment.”

Jaime shook his head, sudden suspicion striking him at his good fortune. He had no doubt that
having a hard-bitten bastard like Bronn beside him would make his journey endlessly easier in
more ways than he could possibly name. Jaime had always been blessed with luck, but this
dramatic turn in his fortune gave him some pause. “How do I know that Cersei didn’t send you to
kill me?”

Bronn laughed at that, throwing his head back in astonishment. He shook his head before standing
to search for a proper branch to spit his rabbit on. “You think Cersei would send me?” The man
sat down again, having found a serviceable limb and promptly began skewering the corpse with
mindless ease. “You put me in a hell of predicament, you did, up and leaving like that.” Jaime
titled his head at him, eyes narrowed in question. “Your cunt of a sister hates me, you know. She
thinks I aim to betray her, because I was bloody fool enough to arrange that damn meeting between
you and your brother,” Bronn looked away, shaking his head disappointedly as he held the rabbit
over the fire. “If I hadn’t left when I did, my bloody head would have been on a spike by now.”

Jaime looked down at this, shameful realization slowly soaking into his bones. “I’m sorry, my
friend, for putting you in such a position. I had not considered--”
“Aye, of course you didn’t consider,” Bronn interrupted hotly. “Why would you? You’re Jaime fucking Lannister. And Lannisters do whatever the fuck they want.”

Jaime recoiled at this, the truth of it biting into him like a glancing arrow. “I never wanted to place in you in danger, Bronn. You’ve been a true friend to both me and my brother--”

“Aye, for what fucking good it’s done me.”

“I am sorry for your troubles, Bronn… really I am, but this-- this is the right thing to do.”

Bronn looked at him from over the fire, pale eyes flashing with some amount of resigned frustration. He shifted and placed his elbows upon his knees, watching the grease from the rabbit drip down and hiss in the embers. “So the right thing to do is to deliver a one-handed traitor to the Dragon Queen and Jon Snow instead of an army?”

Jaime gritted his teeth, looking down to the now frost-damp leaves between his feet. This very same thought had been his one constant companion since leaving King’s Landing. It had plagued him like a stubborn cough-- and had much the same effect on his comfort and sleep.

“I cannot break another oath,” he said tightly, anguished tears burning in his eyes as he glanced back up at his friend. “I cannot fight for the side that abandons all reason. That abandons all humanity. Not even for Cersei can I do such a thing.”

Bronn nodded, throwing a resigned hand up. “I guess it’s a good thing I came then.”

Jaime shifted, huffing a rueful breath. “You came only for your reward. I will see that you get it…” he trailed off, throwing a stray twig into the fire. “If any of us are alive by the end of it all.”

Bronn shrugged, tearing off a strip of meat from the rabbit’s charred haunches. “Oh, I think we stand a fairly good chance at surviving, if you ask me.” He devoured the morsel, wincing slightly at the heat of it in his mouth. “And I know better than to trust just you to give me that castle,” he said, pointing at him with a grease-shined finger. “Way I see it, you’re the only reason I don’t have a bloody castle.”
Jaime spread his hands in question. “Then why are you here?” he asked, “Why not ride north without me and present yourself to this Queen that you hope will grant your wish?”

Bronn shook his head. “You really are thick sometimes, you know that? You think the bloody Dragon Queen is going to give me what I want if I show up there with a sword and my cock swinging in the wind?” He shook his head again, turning the rabbit over the flames. “No, I need someone to vouch for me. And I think that would be you.”

Jaime nodded agreeably, but still not fully understanding. “Of course, my friend, but what have you done to secure your favor with the Dragon Queen? I highly doubt that even my... *lofty* praises would do you much good on that front.”

Bronn shrugged, bringing the rabbit towards him and tearing off a leg. “I think an army for a castle is a pretty damn good bargain, don’t you think?” he replied coolly, offering him the leg.

Jaime froze at his words, ignoring the offered meat and staring at his friend blankly for a moment, gathering himself. Bronn rolled his eyes before tearing into the leg himself with much gusto. “The Lannister banners are sworn to the crown-- to my sister. They do not follow--”

“Your sister is a cunt,” Bronn grumbled as he threw his empty bone into the fire, wiping his mouth with his wrist.

“That might be true, but they are sworn to protect--”

“Oh, will you bloody shut up?” Bronn spat sourly through another mouthful of rabbit. He waved an impatient hand to the woods at Jaime’s back. “Why don’t you walk to the top of that hill there? Bloody see for yourself. I’m trying to eat, for fuck’s sake.”

Slowly, Jaime stood, torn between a deep and wild suspicion that this was simply a trap-- and the overwhelming curiosity that gnawed at him like a dog with a fresh bone. He finally headed up the slope behind him, twilight fast approaching with the days growing ever shorter, but he could still make his way without a torch.

After several minutes, he came to the top of the slope, the trees thinning and clearing almost entirely at its crest. As he walked forward he came to see that the hill was actually more of rocky ridge, a tumble of stone standing tall above the velveted fields below. He looked about, the sky alight with a seam of gold and red, capped by clouds the color of a bruise.
He had been tracking east, following rutted cattle trails and trapper’s paths that he had hoped were running fairly parallel to the Kingsroad in his journey north. Evidently, he had been closer to the great road than he had realized.

Below him, towards the horizon, flew dozens and dozens of banners. Hundreds of tents mottled the countryside, looking oddly like a honeycomb dotted with jewels of torches and campfires. He could not clearly see the crests upon the banners from this distance, but he knew those colors better than he knew the lines on his own hand.

Bronn strolled easily through the brush, coming to join him from his vantage point, where he stood breathless and limp. He tucked his thumbs into his belt, sighing as he squinted at the campsite below. “Armies don’t follow cunts, Kingslayer, they follow leaders.”

Jaime looked over at him, his face feeling oddly numb, his mind struggling to find purchase in the wake of what he was realizing. “You did this?” he asked weakly.

Bronn shrugged, kissing his teeth. “Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t,” he replied simply, clapping him hard on the shoulder as he stepped closer to him. “Either way, you’re getting me a fucking castle.”

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Sansa stood at the parapets, the wind lashing her cloak, scraping white ghosts of snow from the tops of the drifts of heaped snow beside her. She watched as the silver-flash of many spears and helms in the grey winter sun flowed toward Winterfell like the sparkle of a mighty and distant river.

She turned her eyes away, searching the grounds before the walls of the castle, where scores of bannermen and refugees already camped outside the protection of Winterfell’s walls. The constant din of toil reached her as no more than a distant echo from where she stood, but she watched as her people scooped newly-made mud into waiting horse carts.

After the meeting with the queen and Lyanna Mormont, and in light of recent news, Sansa had ordered all able bodied men and women to dig trenches. Trenches as long and as deep as they could-- surrounding the castle and all the land that would soon be taken up by the thousands of men heading their way. Daenerys was to ride atop her dragon, directing his hellfire into strait, orderly lines that may be excavated in the wake of its searing heat.
Sansa watched the progress, cold and beautiful and still as stone, wondering what it would look like from this height, all afloat-- rivers of molten gold flowing through the moors like strange floodwaters. Fine and delicate as the veins in the top of her hand as they filled with the dark corpses of the dead, finally put to rest by the flame and ash.

She looked back to the stream of silver rushing down the road, and smiled.

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Dany could not help but feel shameful, hiding as she did.

She had emerged the previous morning to greet the Lady Karstark and the Lord Umber, who had done little else but stare at her like the frightened children they were. Her already sore and swollen heart could hardly withstand the sympathy she felt for them-- fatherless children now bearing the weight that even great men far past their years found difficult to wield. Hearing about Jon Snow’s mercy, his refusal to drive them from the homes of their fathers despite their many sins, proved to be the killing blow and she had to rise hastily, blaming off porridge for breakfast for her abrupt departure, before almost flying from the room.

Astride Drogon’s infernal warmth as the bleak winter winds bit into her cheeks like hungry hounds, she felt some amount of comfort. Just a bit of her sadness, her frustration, her consuming guilt sloughed away in the frosty air as she flew. “Your brother is not dead, my son,” she had whispered to Drogon, freezing tears stinging her face. “But neither does he live.”

She had heard the bells that morning, just after breakfast-- The king was only hours from Winterfell’s gates. Ghost had whined excitedly at the window. She had opened the door for him to go out to meet his long-lost master and he had taken the invitation reluctantly, stopping to sniff at her at the door, nudging his snout under her palm. “Go,” she breathed with a sad smile, and he went.

Now, she sat tense and unmoving in front of the fire, mindlessly sipping her wine-- body locked in a heady spell of dread and longing. All her days in Winterfell, she had wished for nothing but to be near him again… but now she could only feel a sinister doubt lay its sullen weight in her belly.

The only sound came from Gilly, sitting on the couch beside the chair Dany occupied, darning a pair of socks.
“I’ve always hated mending socks,” Gilly said after the silence had become too much for her. Gilly was the only person Daenerys had allowed into her chamber-- save for Tyrion the night after she had heard the news. He had not attempted to visit her since, for very good reason. Dany found the woman’s presence oddly calming. And with Missandei’s absence sorely felt, Dany could not help but insist on the woman taking up her missing friend’s duties— both practical and otherwise.

The woman hissed in a breath and shook the finger she had just pricked with her needle. “It always seems like the more you mend them, the more they tear.”

Dany smiled at her, knowing full-well what a sorry excuse for a smile it probably proved to be. There was a long pause before Dany turned to look at the woman sitting beside her. “I suppose, with the king incoming, I should put up my hair.”

Gilly nodded, placing her sewing aside and scurrying away to gather brush and pins. She returned with all and sundry tucked into her arms and came to stand behind her. Dany shifted forward in her seat and Gilly began running the comb through her hair. Dany did not envy her task, as she had just finished burning more trenches with Drogon a few hours earlier. Gilly was never one to complain however, Dany found. Her frank, undressed company was a balm to the constant flattery and simpering Dany usually had to endure.

They sat in silence for some time as Gilly tugged out the tangles from her hair. Dany found herself looking at the sleeping form of Gilly’s son laying on the couch next to her. His little chest rising and falling under the blanket he was wrapped in, the unknowing clenching of his little fist, lost in dreams. “Forgive me, Gilly, but when did your son start walking?”

“Well, he started walking just before he was a year old, Your Grace.”

Dany felt something break within her as she bit her lip, painfully hard. She imagined a swarthy, sooty-haired boy playing on the floor at their feet. She imagined that Rhaego and Little Sam would have been friends. Passing toys back and forth in their chubby little hands, crying when one broke. They would have been around the same age, after all. “Is that when most children begin to walk?” A crack in her voice betrayed her and she closed her eyes, banishing the son she never knew from her mind.

She felt the comb pause in her hair at that, before Gilly continued her task, more slowly this time. “Well, I suppose he was a bit early, your Grace, but not by much.”

“And talking? When do babies start talking?” She asked, her voice hopelessly breathless.
She heard the soft *tap* of the comb coming to rest on the table beside her and then Gilly was standing in front of her. Dany glanced up at her but looked just as quickly away, not able to heft the weight of understanding that Gilly held within her face.

“You’ve lost a child,” the woman said, voice unaffected. “More than one.”

Dany could only keep her eyes to the hearth, not daring to catch a glimpse the soft light of sympathy that Gilly was holding for her. She had foolishly told Gilly about Viserion the night before—feeling weak and exhausted, wanting to spill a bit of her darkness out. She had told her everything she could about him—his music, his penchant for the dramatic, his pale eyes. Gilly had listened to it all, nodding as Dany had fell back in her chair, spent. “There is nothing worse in this world than losing a child,” was the only thing she had said before leaving her that night.

Gilly crouched in front of her, not to be evaded so easily. “From what I can see,” she began slowly, her voice pitched low and unsure, “Is the Night King took a child away from a loving mother.” The woman glanced over at the babe snoring quietly on the couch, her eyes suddenly far away and dangerous. “How can a demon like that know about the wrath of a mother?” She turned her eyes back to her, an ancient and fundamental understanding passing between them like a current. “Way I see it, Your Grace, the Night King made a grave mistake, taking a child from the Mother of Dragons.”

Dany gazed up at her, a fresh and starving flame flickering into life behind her heart. She found her eyes dry, her teeth clenched tight together as the corner of her mouth turned up as quick as a flick of a blade. “I think you might be right, my friend.”

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The gates rumbled open and he rode in hard, a bleak desperation suddenly taking hold of his heart. He heard The Hound’s own horse following behind him, struggling on the frosty ground.

The second he dismounted, Arya was in his arms, and he did not know if anything could be as sweet as this feeling. He had to stumble back a step to steady himself, clasping her to him, arms like vises, lifting her from her feet as he breathed her in, smelling of woodsmoke and snowmelt and so very like *home*. Arya clutched his shoulders, pressing her face into his neck with a small, joyful sob.

“I feared you dead,” Jon managed through the hot weight of joy that had grown in his chest.
Arya pulled away, a feral grin lighting her features. “That’s something, coming from you.”

Jon grasped her face in his hands, barking a laugh, overjoyed. “I thought I’d never see you again,” he looked her up and down, taking in the cloak, so like father’s, the hauberk, so like his own. He pointed to the sword at her hip, eyes going wide as something strange swelled his heart at the sight of the unmistakable pommel. “Is that…”

“Needle,” she supplied, beaming. Jon simply smiled back, words too feeble for him at this moment, and brought her into his arms again.

He looked up, glancing about and caught sight of his missing sister, standing hesitantly to his left. Jon held out an arm and Sansa strode forward, throwing herself into his embrace. He kissed each of his sister's brows in turn, eyes shut tight against the welling of his glad tears.

But only so much time was allowed for such happy respite for a king. Bran came forward in a strange wheeled chair, pushed along by Sam of all people. Jon regained a small bit of his composure and broke his embrace with his dearly missed sisters. “Bran,” he said breathlessly as he embraced him.

“It is good to see you, brother,” Bran returned with a weak pat to his shoulder.

Jon straightened, looking over at Sam. His friend grinned at him sheepishly before taking a step forward and the two men embraced enthusiastically. “I thought you were supposed to be in Old Town?” Jon asked as they broke apart, clapping him on the shoulder.

Sam nodded, looking nervous. “Aye, well… I decided I was needed here.”

Jon looked at him, eye narrowed, “That is insubordination, Sam.”

Sam blanched, his mouth opening and closing a few times in his newly found dread. “Your Grace,” he stammered. “I apologize-- really, but I felt rather useless down there cleaning chamber pots and--”

Jon laughed, clapping his friend on the shoulder good naturedly. “I’m teasing you, Sam. I can’t tell
you how good it feels to see you here.”

Sam smiled, looking immeasurably relieved.

“Ghost!” Jon cried as the Direwolf galloped towards him and suddenly the King in the North found himself sprawled in the icy mud, blown over by the great beast. “I’m glad to see you too, boy,” Jon said through his shocked laughter, pushing away the happily laving tongue and righting himself on his feet.

Jon looked around at his gathered friends and family, feeling lighter than he had in weeks. He found himself searching for her, trying very hard not to give himself away, but his eyes thirsted for the pale crown of her hair, the gray gaze of her eyes.

Ghost seemed to sense his anxiety kick up as he realized she was not there to greet him. The wolf nudged his hand with a wet nose in a comforting sort of way.

Davos stepped forward with Tyrion and both men’s smiles and subsequent bows looked as grim as the slate sky above them. “Your Grace,” Davos greeted, “It is good to see you back in Winterfell.”

Jon nodded a bit distractedly, unease inching up his spine with every passing breath. “Where is the queen?” He asked him quietly, glancing about again, hoping his tone sounded merely curious.

Davos opened and closed his mouth, a worried crease furrowing between his eyes. He glanced back at Tyrion who looked equally uncomfortable. “Where is the queen?” Jon said again, unable to hide away his mounting worry.

“There is something you must know,” Bran said from behind him, voice solemn. Jon turned to him, confused and alarmed in equal measure. “But we must get to somewhere more private,” he said, indicating the slow trickle of lords and bannermen and all sundry moving through the gates.

Sansa squeezed his shoulder. “Go with Bran and Sam. I’ll see to our guests.”

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Sam, for once, did not talk much as Bran delivered the news to his friend.

His muteness was not just caused by the dreadful nature of the tale that Bran had to tell, but also by Sam’s insatiable thirst for knowledge. For confirmation of his suspicions.

He watched as lines of despair etched themselves around his eyes. He watched the King in the North lean his fists upon the table and hang his head. “I should have been here,” he heard Jon say, voice laced with something dark and fierce—protective. As he watched Jon’s torment spill out into the weak lantern light, as he listened to the pain fill his words, Sam realized why some people hated maesters so.

Maesters knew the truth— and the truth was often painful. The truth could be laid aside for a lofty lie if not for the meddlesome nature of the maesters and their facts.

And Jon only abided the truth, only worked in honesty.

Which is perhaps why Sam sunk heavily into the chair opposite his friend when Jon left in a towering rage.

“What now?” Same inquired weakly.

Bran paused for quite some time, staring blankly into the fire. “I am only guessing, but I think you mean what do we do about what we know of Jon, after he so clearly showed his true feelings for the queen to us.”

Sam swallowed, uncomfortable. “I think I was speaking more… generally than that,” he said with an uneasy smile. “But yes, I suppose that does fall within what I was talking about.”

Bran managed a quick, cold smile. “He must know, no matter what. And we will tell him tonight.”

Sam nearly choked on his own breath as he lunged from his chair. “Tonight?” he gasped. “Don’t you think… well, don’t you think that’s a bit much?”

Bran shook his head, eyes distant as they always were. “He must know, and he must know
tonight.”

“Now, now,” Sam intoned pleadingly as he stepped closer to his friend. “There’s no need to be hasty, right? No one needs to know right now, don’t you think?” Sam asked nervously, licking his lips. “I mean, think about it, Bran. Daenerys has been fighting her whole life for the throne-- to tell her she is not the rightful heir when we need her most…” he trailed off, shrugging. “Well, that just seems plain foolish to me. We can tell them once the war is won. What do you think?”

Bran looked at him flatly, his expression vaguely exasperated. “Your concern for your friend and his queen is admirable, Sam, but you do not understand.”

Sam huffed out a thoroughly frustrated breath at this, shaking his head. “I will not deny that I do not wish to hurt Jon, but I also do not see the merit of telling him our secret so soon.” He lifted a shoulder, conciliatory. “Why not wait until the war in the North is won? What harm could possibly come of it?”

“The harm that could come of it, Sam, is that they would not realize the power that lies within them,” Bran intoned flatly. “Jon and the queen are a part of something so much greater than you or I could ever hope to fully understand. And the reason for that is because of who the queen is, and who Jon is-- who Jon really is.” He sighed, looking to the fire again. “They must know, for everyone’s sake.”

Sam stilled, sitting back in his chair with a defeated huff. He looked into the hearth, trying to wrangle what Bran was telling him. He did not like the idea of telling Jon and the queen what they knew to be true-- not one bit.

He did not like it, but he knew that he could not argue with the Three-Eyed Raven.

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His blood thundered in his veins like the wild herds of horses he used to chase through the moors when he was a boy. Violence steamed under his skin. Every breath stoked the fire blazing in his heart, carved away more and more of his brittle resolve. Oddly, he felt that it was much the same response he felt before a battle-- his body readying itself to take up his sword, to paint the earth with blood.

His boots thudded upon the stone, his brain lost in a tormented swirl, his ears filled with the clamor
of alarm, of fear, of dread.

He pulled the door open, not fully aware of how he got here, barely pausing in his strides. He stopped short, laid low by the image of her, standing at the mantle and steeped in shadow, in firelight.

The very same storm that resided within him was raging in her eyes as she looked at him.

“Daenerys,” he gasped within the air now fleeing his lungs. He found that his voice could hold no more than the weight of her name-- he was helpless, bereft, locked within the spell cast by her gaze.

The sound of her name on his tongue broke something within her. She closed her eyes, turned from him, and he stumbled forward, his limbs heavy, his mouth dry, and caught her up in his arms.

She was stiff, unyielding, her arms tensing like a bow string. He held on, not knowing what else to do-- only certain that if she rejected him he would crumble away like a prodded cinder.

After what seemed like hours, he heard her choke on a sob and Jon closed his eyes against the offense of it. She who held the world in her hands and magic in her breath was not meant for such things.

He felt the edges of her nails press into his back, little crescents of rage and grief stamped into the leather of his hauberk forever. “My child,” she whispered, the words humid on his neck as he tightened his grip on her, lifting her, bringing her more fully into his chest. “He has my son.”

He slammed his eyes shut again, feeling the rage pool and simmer deep in his belly like a caldera. The raggedness of her voice, the steely promise of violence girding her words-- it set him reeling, cast into the void with no hope of ever finding his way back. He pressed his palms over the column of her spine, the ridge of her shoulders, hoping that they may spirit this blackness from her. He pressed a kiss into the skin behind her ear, pushed his face into her neck, breathed in the heated scent of her like brimstone.

He wanted to find his horse and ride north, to call the Night King and his dragon down from the sky and plunge Longclaw into his chest. He wanted to undress the woman in his arms and memorize the way she gasped under his mouth so that he may recall it later like a poem. He wanted to take her up, carry her away, far away, lock the door forever.
But all he could do was stand.

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“I don’t think glaring at the glass will help it to refill,” Varys intoned lightly from behind where he sat.

Tyrion lifted the nearly empty cup and twirled it between his forefinger and thumb by the stem. “Why the stem?”

He heard Vary stride over, seating himself in a chair next to him. “My lord?”

Tyrion placed the cup back down on the table. “I mean, why make such a glass? Do you know how many wine cups I’ve broken in my day, Lord Varys?” The man simply shrugged, already looking thoroughly bored. “It just seems… so impractical.”

“I believe the design of the glass is to provide some temperature regulation, my lord, so that one’s hand does not overly warm it while drinking.”

Tyrion nodded slowly at that, pursing his lips. “I suppose that is a good enough reason,” he replied, gulping down the last morsel. “Such care taken into designing such a trivial thing, don’t you think?”

Varys raised his eyebrows, nonplussed. “I do not drink, my lord. I would not know.”

Tyrion shifted, his mood darkening. “What barbarous cunt decided to invest such time and labor to designing the perfect vessel to hold wine?”

“I suppose someone who was paid well,” Varys replied dryly, taking up the empty glass before Tyrion and placing it down beside himself. “I suggest maybe halting with the beverage in question, my lord.”

Tyrion wagged a finger at him, determined. “You see, Lord Varys, that is where you’re wrong. The world is as fucked as it is because some powdered lord decided that a cup wasn’t good enough
for his Dornish red and so he concerned himself with that instead of what actually matters.”

“Oh?” Varys said mildly. “Tell me, my lord, would you drink a good Dornish red from a horn instead of a goblet?”

Tyrion scrunched his face up, swaying in his chair a bit. “No, of course not. I’m not an animal.”

Varys shrugged. “Then it seems that we are at an impasse, my Lord.” The man paused, looking at him with a faint line of worry between his eyes. “I am concerned for you, my friend.”

Tyrion spread his hands wide, grinning indulgently. “And why should you be? Everything is perfectly fine! All’s right with the world, Lord Varys!” He exclaimed happily, leaning back in his chair with an exaggerated sigh. “The Night King has a fucking undead dragon because of a plan I came up with. My queen refuses to speak to me. I haven’t shit in three days. I couldn’t be happier.”

Varys shifted, looking endlessly exasperated. “You know, I had hoped that the fits of drunken self-loathing were well behind you after Volantis.”

Tyrion pointed at him, suppressing a burp. “Ah, my friend, I thought you knew me better than that. I am too fond of self-loathing to quit the habit altogether.”

Varys leaned forward, his eyes cold and serious. “Be that as it may, my lord, you are still the queen’s Hand and you are going to be drunk for what is probably the most important War Council we have had yet. You best pull yourself together before our queen has Ser Jorah bring her your head.”

Tyrion deflated at this, looking glumly at his hands. “I fear that you have not succeeded in pulling me from my self loathing, my lord.”

“That was never my intention, my friend. I know well the folly of such an endeavor.” The man lifted his shoulders, sighing in exasperated fondness. “Nevertheless, I have grown fond of you and your wisdom, despite myself. I only speak with selfish interests in mind. I cannot be the only clever one left on Daenerys’ council.”

Tyrion smiled at him tiredly. “Thank you, my friend.”
Varys said nothing, reaching for the flagon of water next to him and pouring a cup, holding it out to him. Tyrion took it, gulping. “You have an hour until everyone arrives,” he said pointedly as he poured him another cup.

“Yes, yes, have it your way,” Tyrion said, flapping a hand at him in irritation. It was going to be a very long night.

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“I did not expect you for another three days,” Daenerys said quietly as she ran an idle thumb over the top of his hand.

Jon shifted, gathering her more fully to his side on the couch. “You can thank your son for that,” he replied. “He cleared our way for us.”

Daenerys lifted herself up on an arm, so that she may look into his face, incredulous. “He did what?”

Jon shrugged, sliding a hand up and down her back. “I asked him to help us.”

“You asked him?”

Jon stilled his hand, the alarmed expression in her face putting him on edge. “Was I… did I overstep somehow?” He asked worriedly as he pressed his thumb and forefinger into her elbow. “I’m sorry, Daenerys, I did not know…”

“No, no…” she replied quietly as she searched his face, brow creased in mild suspicion, in unsure wonder. “It’s just… well, my dragons only respond to me.”

Jon paused, looking around the room pensively for a moment before he shrugged again. “How many people do you know that have tried?” he asked with an amused smirk. “Who do you know would be stupid enough to attempt such a thing?”
A knowing smile crept along her lips before ending in a bark of surprised laughter. “You present a compelling argument, Jon Snow.”

He grinned back at her, at a loss as to how he had been granted powers to make this woman laugh, to smile-- the contrast striking against what he had witnessed from her not moments before. He wanted nothing more than to lean forward and kiss her then, to steal the taste of her from her mouth-- to dig his teeth into the slope of her shoulder so he could hear her gasp against his neck. But to his great dismay she rose from the couch, crossing over to the small console to pour some wine for them both.

“We are to meet with both our councils in just under an hour, my lord,” she said pointedly, brows raised.

A shocked breath escaped him as he took the glass she offered him. “Am I that obvious?”

“We might just say that subtlety is not among your many talents,” she answered as she lowered herself into the chair beside him, hiding an affectionate grin behind her glass.

They sat in easy silence for time. Both simply enjoying, simply being.

She shifted in the chair, straightening her back and the happy quiet took on a different texture—growing rough, thick. “I will take back what was stolen from me,” she said, deadly calm, the thirst for blood in her voice making his skin prickle. “I will strike him from the sky like swatting a fly.”

Jon felt his blood run cold as he dared to look at her, knowing full well the unbreakable determination he would see in her face. Her skin glowed pale as wax in the twilight of the fire, her eyes dark and flashing like a sparking thunderhead. He felt his stomach bottom out, his blood fall to his feet as he threw his eyes down to the floor, closing them against the fear that doused him good as a downpour.

The moment Bran had told him about Viserion in that dim room, a lifetime ago, the terror and rage that blew up in him like a storm was seeded by many things-- shame, guilt, despair. Strongest of all was the dreadful certainty that overcame him then— that she would look him in the eyes and tell him this very same thing and there would be nothing he could do to stop her. Even worse… that there would be no way for him to even help her. He would be left to stand uselessly on the ground, watching a battle between gods and demons unfold within the curls of smoke and cloud far above him.
He cleared his throat, to rid himself of the darkness that had settled there, to no avail. “Daenerys...”

“You cannot convince me otherwise, my lord,” she cut across him, adopting the detached, cold facade of a queen with a made-up mind. He looked at her, with her shoulders taut and mouth grim — it was a countenance he knew well. The queen readying for a fight. “What other machinery do we have to destroy such a creature? With the Night King on the back of a dragon, he can fly ahead at will, burn everything in his path. Raise the dead in his wake.”

Jon shook his head. “If you fall, we are lost,” he said, his voice cracked and pitted like untended armor, weaker than he intended.

“If I do nothing, we are lost,” she countered, her face softening. “He was my son, Jon. This is my burden to bear.”

“Not just yours, my queen.” Jon shook his head slowly, stroking a thoughtful hand over his chin. She opened her mouth to protest further, but he pressed on, anger and dark realization driving him headlong into dangerous waters. “You once told me,” he ventured, choosing each word with great care. “That we would fight the Night King together.” He looked over at her and she looked stricken, tense and pale and paralyzed by his gaze. “Aye, I know I can’t make you stay. Bloody hell, I think you might just be right, but, please, Daenerys, do not look at me and tell me you must do this alone.” He was shocked to hear a waver in his voice-- his words quaking under the weight of everything he was feeling in that moment.

“I would never ask this of you,” she returned, voice small.

Jon barked out a harsh, mirthless laugh. “And you never will.” He shook his head, leaning his elbows on his thighs as he stared into the fire. “You may ask anything of me, Daenerys, though I know you won’t. But you cannot ask me to stay behind. I don’t know what help I’ll be out there.” He said darkly within a cold chuckle as he rubbed his hands together. “I don’t even know what will happen, or how we will do it, but we’re damn well going to do it together.”

There was a long, heavy pause before he heard Daenerys shift and suddenly she was knelt beside him. Her face was wretched, eyes rimmed with tears. He reached out, cupping her jaw and brushing a thumb over the ridge of her cheek. He wondered, vaguely, if he would ever grow used to the sight of her face-- already more precious to him than water or air. “What did I do?” she whispered, voice wrecked and weak. “What did I do to find you?”

His fingers twitched, moving into the silver locks of her hair that twined around his wrist like vines. He shook his head, struck dumb, feeling hollowed out in the wake of the love that burned in
her eyes. He dropped his brow to her own, and he heard her take in a rasping breath. “You can’t ask me such questions,” he said with a tiny, rueful smile. “I am no poet. I could not give you a proper response.”

She laughed, and *gods* it sounded like the sweetest music he’d ever heard. She wrapped her fingers around his wrist before crashing her mouth onto his own.

They broke apart, both breathing hard. Daenerys’ eyes were full with newly kindled determination— even a small bit of *hope*. “So, Jon Snow,” she breathed through her kiss-bruised lips. “What are we to do?”

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“Would you please be so kind as to stop that incessant noise, Lord Varys?” Tyrion requested with no small amount of anger. “I am now mostly sober so my nerves are not what they were before.”

The man looked over at him, his face thoroughly unconcerned as he continued his tapping. “They’re late.”

Tyrion sighed, leaning back in his chair. “I noticed.”

“Any theories as to why?”

“Not any that can be shared in polite company.”

Varys raised his eyebrows, opening his mouth to respond when the doors to the Hall swung open noisily.

First came the Lady Brienne abreast with Ser Jorah and The Hound— all looking stolid and humorless. They fanned out to the borders of the hall, taking up stations befitting of any Kings or Queensguard. Behind them Grey Worm, Missandei, and Ser Davos entered, standing behind the chairs next to himself and Varys. A short while later followed the ladies Arya and Sansa with Lord Bran being pushed along in his wheeled chair by Samwell Tarly, as well as a tall, bearded man with wild red hair he did not recognize. Jon Snow and Daenerys entered last, looking as fearsome and regal as he had ever seen. Both looked ready for the taste of blood as they lowered into their seats at the head of the table opposite him. The King’s Direwolf padded silently in behind them,
laying down between the two monarchs. Tyrion glanced at Varys, who returned his gaze with equalled trepidation. It was to be a long night indeed.

“Shall we begin?” Daenerys said flatly from her seat, looking at him pointedly, hands folded before her.

He nodded and everyone gathered took up their seats.

The Great Hall of Winterfell had been hastily converted into a War Room of sorts, in the face of the unhappy circumstance of Winterfell lacking a proper chamber for such discourse. One of the long side tables had been pulled into the middle of the room and assorted chairs from similarly assorted rooms had been gathered to surround it. An ancient and frayed map, borrowed from Samwell Tarly’s “collection” laid upon the table. Though faded and out of date, it was large and beautiful and perfectly suitable for their needs. Carved figures of Stark Direwolves, Targaryen Dragons and all the sundry houses of the North sat upon Winterfell. A lonely figure that he recognized to be the flayed man of house Bolton sat over Eastwatch. He supposed, with the Night King possessing no heraldry, the now extinct enemy of House Stark was apt of a representation as any.

Tyrion shifted in his seat, clearing his throat. “My lords, my ladies,” he said with a nod to each side of him. “I thank you for joining us.” His greeting was met mostly with blank stares and stony silence. Only the red-headed man seemed fit to nod back to him. He looked over at the man, inclining his head. “Forgive me, my lord, but I don’t think we’ve met.”

“This is Tormund Giantsbane, my lord,” Jon Snow answered. “He is a friend of mine. He went with me beyond The Wall. He was there, at Eastwatch, when the Night King brought it down. He rode in not an hour ago.”

Tyrion nodded, not knowing what else to do with this information as the man in question glared at him suspiciously. “Well,” he said tightly. “Where shall we begin?”

“I saw it,” The man named Tormund blurted, his eyes a bit wild. “I saw that fucking demon-- it brought that bloody wall down with a breath,” he said angrily, clenching his fist upon the table.

Tyrion watched as the queen shifted uneasily in her chair, eyes bruised with exhaustion. “We must send word to Castle Black,” Jon Snow said.
Tormund shook his head. “Whatever raven you send won’t be quick enough. That one-eyed cunt rode for Castle Black as soon as he could.”

Tyrion looked to Jon, hoping for some clarification, but the man only nodded to Tormund. “That was good of him to do.”

Tormund snorted. “It was good that you have your own Warg, Jon Snow,” the man replied as he looked over at Bran with a knowing nod. “Though, I wish I would’ve known. Killed two horses trying to get here to tell you.”

“Does Beric intend to tell Castle Black to ride south?” Jon asked.

Tormund nodded. “Aye, I believe he does. The crows guard a wall. They’re not much use if it isn’t really a fucking wall anymore.”

“And he will send word to the Shadow Tower from there?” Jon asked and Tormund nodded affirmatively.

There was a brief silence before Tyrion cleared his throat. “Good, so that means more men to add to our forces.” Tyrion spread his hands to the map before him. “So what can we expect to be our strategy now?”

“I have ordered trenches to be dug, my lord,” Lady Sansa replied. “With the help of the queen and her dragon, we have been able to excavate rapidly. We mean to fill them with dung and pitch, and ignite them when the army draws near.”

Tyrion nodded approvingly at her and saw the astonished and proud glance Jon Snow gave both his sister and the queen. “And how are the weapons coming along?”

“We will have 50,000 arrows and 12,000 spears by the end of the day tomorrow, my lord. With more still to be made. Axes and daggers have not been properly counted but I suspect we have around 12,000,” Sansa said coolly, all the authority of a lord double her age encompassed within her words.

“Well, that is fantastic to hear,” Tyrion said with a tight smile. “And how goes things with your Northern lords, King Snow?”
Jon looked away darkly, shoulders shifting. “They expect a meeting in the morning.”

That was a wholly insufficient answer, but Tyrion knew better than to try to press him on the subject. “Ah,” he began shifting forward in his seat. “Well then, I suppose we talk fortifications. Have any trees been felled?”

“Only 300, my lord,” Sansa said. “But they are being milled and hardened as we speak.”

Tyrion opened his mouth to reply but was cut short by Jon Snow. “I am grateful for your diligence, sister. I see that I did the right thing in leaving you in charge with the North and its defenses, but all these preparations mean very little against a dragon.”

Tyrion nodded grimly. “Indeed… the addition of a dragon to the forces of the undead does present a new challenge.”

“Challenge?” Tormund burst out, spittle flying from his mouth. “It’s more than a bloody challenge, dwarf! It is--”

“Enough, Tormund,” Jon Snow interceded. The man leaned back in his chair slightly, looking affronted, but fell silent.

“We must take out the Night King’s dragon,” Daenerys declared quietly. “That must be our first priority. We stand no chance while the Night King sits upon a dragon.”

“And how do you suggest we do such a thing?” Tyrion asked, spreading his hands out. “Killing a dragon is nasty business.”

“The Night King did it easily enough,” Daenerys replied, her voice laced with something so dark and dangerous it made Tyrion shift in his chair.

“We can hold up, Your Graces,” Davos interjected, leaning forward with his palms on the table. “Hold up and wait for the Lannister forces to arrive. I heard of the weapon they used against your dragon on the Blackwater Rush, Your Grace. They have more, I’m sure of it. We can send a raven and request they bring--”
“Whatever that awful invention might have been, my Lord,” Deanerys cut across him coldly. “I can assure you that it will not bring down whatever Viserion is now.”

“Besides,” Jon continued, “We do not have the time for that. As long as the Night King rides on the back of a dragon, he can fly ahead of his armies and create new ones from battlefields and graveyards old and new alike.”

A cold and grim silence met his words, the full enormity of the challenge they faced sinking into all present like a slow working poison.

“Then we march to meet him,” Grey Worm suddenly blurted, slapping a hand on the table. “I march Unsullied North and we kill this king and the dragon he stole from our queen.”

Daenerys over looked at her commander adoringly. “You honor me, Grey Worm, with your bravery, but you cannot do this thing. I cannot risk you becoming recruits in the army of the dead. You and the Unsullied are too precious to me.”

Grey Worm leaned back in his chair, looking murderous but placated--- for now. There was a long silence and Tyrion watched as Jon and Daenerys both exchanged meaningful looks. Finally, the Queen stood. She reached forward, grasping a dragon figure from the table and placing it in front of the Bolton figure. “The best way to slay a dragon, is with another dragon.”

A stunned silence greeted her words, before several voices and much chair scraping broke out at once.

“My queen!” Grey Worm shouted.

“Fuck that!” Tormund roared.

“It’s far too dangerous!” Davos gasped.

“You cannot!” Tyrion cried as he left his seat.
“I must,” The queen replied coolly in the wake of this onslaught. “It is the only way.”

Tyrion pushed his chair back noisily, striding around the long table to face her fully. “You cannot,” he repeated darkly.

“I can,” she returned, her voice forced through gritted teeth. “And I will.”

Tyrion looked down at his feet, his jaw clenching hard. He knew that the fight was lost even before it began. He turned to Jon Snow behind him. He had been wary of the King in the North’s obvious affection for his queen, but now a sudden hope filled his chest that his love for her may actually aid him in this endeavor. Surely he could convince her otherwise. “Jon Snow,” he said, throwing his hands up in entreaty. “Surely you disapprove of such a reckless plan?”

“I do not think it reckless,” the man replied, his voice heavy with that foolhardy assuredness that Tyrion knew all too well. Memories of the council at Dragonstone rose unbidden in his mind. The same council that had sent Jon Snow to the Wall and his queen and her dragons after him. He hung his head in defeat and anguish as the room grew quiet. “I aim to go with her.”

These words sparked wild outrage from his sisters. “You’re mad!” Arya shouted at the same time as Sansa’s enraged “You can’t!”

“The Night King has powers we cannot comprehend!” Jon shouted, standing amidst the clamor. The crowd around the table stilled, but the air remained taut with an dark tension. “He knew we were coming. He knew about Daenerys and her dragons. He knew all of it. And he knew a dragon could bring down The Wall.” Jon Snow shook his head, looking miserable and defeated. “It was his plan the whole time.”

A silence greeted his words, as all gathered glanced about nervously, unsure of what the King in the North was claiming. “He’s right,” Bran intoned assuredly. “The Night King saw everything.”

The air surrounding the group somehow fell thicker about them at these words as all eyes turned to the young man. “How the bloody hell do we fight something like that?” Tormund asked breathlessly.

“He is like me, he sees things others cannot,” Bran replied. “He is better at it than me. I must admit, but no one, not even the Night King, can perfect such power. He can be manipulated.”
“Manipulated?” The queen inquired, leaning forward with intense curiosity.

Bran nodded, but shed no more light on the subject, much to Tyrion’s ire. He rubbed frustrated fingers over the ridge of his brow, a headache already settling in. “Let’s just say we go forward with this plan,” he said tightly, “how do you propose we do it? We cannot simply send the two most important people in Westeros into the wild to kill a creature we know nothing about!”

An uneasy silence reigned, Jon and Daenerys sharing a worried glance before Jon nodded and pressed forward. “I know little of the Night King, it is true, my lord, but I do know he has been fixated on me from the start. For what reasons, I cannot begin to know, but I will ride north and where I may be, the Night King will follow.”

“So you are to be bait?” Sansa protested loudly.

Jon nodded, looking intensely uncomfortable. Arya stepped towards him and grasped his wrist. “Brother, please don’t do this.”

“You are our king!” Davos shouted. “I’ve already seen one good man die on account of some dark suspicion. I do not intend to watch you do the same!”

“Please, Jon--” Sansa pleaded, her voice hitching.

Jon, to his credit, looked cowed. At Dragonstone, he had not been surrounded by those who loved him, those who would so ardently protest his cavalier attitude towards his own life. He looked to the floor, face dark and pained. “It is the only way.”

“You’re too important!” Arya cried.

“Jon--” Sansa choked.

“What king am I if I refuse to do this?” Jon suddenly yelled. “By what right can I claim king if allow this evil to go unchecked? To destroy my country and everything I hold dear?” He shook his head, huffing out a pained breath. “It is the only way.”
“So say we use you as bait, Your Grace,” Tyrion began, “this does not change the very real fact that this… Night King possesses spears that can bring down a dragon in a single blow. With nothing but a throw of a spear, this creature can add another dragon to his army and bring down our queen along with it. And that would surely doom us all.”

“The Night King would not be able to wield such a weapon from the back of a dragon,” Jon Snow countered assuredly.

“Let’s suppose that is true for the moment,” Tyrion replied darkly, teeth gritted. “He has others to do this for him.”

“Not if we draw him out,” Bran said and Tyrion turned to him, astonished. “The Night King was once a man—just like you or me. He can be fooled. Hubris is our ally. He has outsmarted us from the beginning— he may well think he can continue to do so.”

“What, pray tell, are you suggesting?” Tyrion asked impatiently.

“He killed a dragon,” Bran replied flatly. “He brought down The Wall— a structure that has stood in his way for thousands of years. He thinks, because of his powers, that he is all knowing. He feels invincible, unstoppable, atop that dragon. He can be drawn out— alone.”

Tyrion nodded, thoroughly unconvinced. “And what makes you think that the Night King will be drawn to our King Snow?” He asked, waving a hand at the man in question. “What is the nature of his fascination with him?”

“I cannot tell you that.”

Tyrion felt his blood run hot with frustration. Beside him, Jon shifted uneasily, looking at his brother with new-found curiosity.

“Alright,” Tyrion quipped, his voice high with mounting annoyance that his attempts to squash this plan had so far proved insufficient, “suppose all of this is true, just for a moment… we cannot send the King in the North into the unknown alone.”

“I bring some Unsullied,” Grey Worm immediately volunteered. “The best men— two hundred only. We protect King in North.” Tyrion watched as Missandei shifted next to him, swallowing
back whatever black thing had risen up within her.

“Aye, and I’ll be damned if I don’t go with your crazy ass, Snow.” Tormund said, clapping him on his back. “I won’t be left here to chat with your cunt Northern lords.”

“You have my sword,” the Hound grumbled from his place in the half-light. “But I think you bloody well knew that already.”

Brienne stepped forward, looking grim as she clutched the pommel of her sword. Tormund reeled where he stood, a strange, stricken expression overcoming his face. “You have mine as well, Your Grace.”

“Aye, and mine too,” Jorah offered as he came more fully into the light. “For you and the queen.”

“I’m going too,” Arya said defiantly.

Jon shook his head, looking despaired. “I will not allow it, Arya.”

Arya grinned at him, feral. “I know we have not seen each other in a long time, brother, but I would still think that you would know better than to try to keep me from doing something I want.”

Jon looked at his sister, something sad and fond inhabiting his face as he shook his head. “Aye, I am a bloody fool.”

“I’ll go,” Sam interjected nervously, standing from his chair, looking pale and endlessly uncomfortable. “I’m-- well, I’m no fighter, Your Graces, but I am a-- a healer,” he ended weakly, knowing full well what this justification implied. “I can't swing a sword, but I can still help.”

Jon shook his head, smiling adoringly at his friend. “You’re the only one here besides myself that’s killed a White Walker, Sam. You will do more than simply help.”

Sam beamed, taking up his chair again, looking pleased.
“Well this certainly improves the situation,” Tyrion said coldly, feeling a bit forgotten. “But it still does not answer what we are to do.”

Daenerys stepped closer to the table, pointing at Castle Black upon the map. “The King in the North will ride to Castle Black. With a small contingent of men, it could draw the Night King away without the support of his army.”

“But he can call a small one of his own,” Tyrion pointed out frankly. “He doesn’t need the support of his vassal lords or the dead he already has if he may call more from wherever he may fly.”

“Aye,” Jon Snow responded with a nod. “Which is why we are all the more certain that he will feel confident enough to fly ahead to meet me. If what Bran says is true, he will see me riding North with only 300 men in tow. He will be over-confident that his dragon, and whatever dead he may conjure along the way, will be enough to finally defeat me.”

“Have you not described the very folly of this plan, Your Grace?” Varys suddenly piped up from his chair where he had sat silent and pensive for the duration. “If this ruse is successful in drawing out the Night King, it will only be because he will prove victorious against such a paltry force.”

“He will not be victorious,” Daenerys responded, imperious and unwavering. “Two free dragons are greater than a slave.”

“A slave?” Tyrion asked.

“Zaldrîzes buzzdari iksos dao r”, Daenerys returned darkly. “A dragon is not a slave, my lord. The Night King may ride what appears to be a dragon, but what Viserion is now is not a true dragon. And the Night King will discover this to his folly.”

Tyrion gaped, not knowing quite what to make of what his Queen was trying to tell him. He knew little of dragons and their nature. As such, his latent suspicion seemed most disingenuous. He simply looked at the ground, at a loss.

“The queen will fly with her dragons to Mole’s Town,” Jon Snow explained in the wake of the unknowing silence that had followed Daenerys’ words. “We will post sentries. When we see the Night King approaching, we will send out a signal. She can be at Castle Black in under an hour.”
“Signal?” Tormund questioned.

“We will set Castle Black ablaze.”

“Forgive me, Your Graces,” Missandei said delicately as she leaned forward from her chair. “But-- the queen’s son… has he not been turned into something of the Undead?”

“Aye, he has,” Jon Snow replied, looking at the woman curiously.

“Well, does it not stand to reason to think that he cannot be killed by conventional means?” Missandei ventured doubtfully, her eyes bouncing from person to person arrayed around the table. “Dragon fire cannot kill a dragon-- much less one that is undead. And a large reason for you being at Dragonstone, Your Grace” she said, nodding to Jon, “was to mine the dragonglass— as it was the only mineral that could kill the undead, correct?”

Tyrion tapped a worried finger on the table as Jon stood silently next to him, seemingly struck dumb by this very real predicament he had obviously not considered. “My lady is right, Your Graces,” Tyrion said heavily, trying to keep the spark of triumph from his voice. “Even if our queen flies her dragons northward to meet the Night King in single combat, you cannot hope to kill him.”

“Dragonglass will kill him,” Jon offered, half-hearted and unhappy. Tyrion well understood the nature of his consternation-- how do you arm a dragon?

Jorah shook his head. “Dragonglass is too brittle, my friend. It could never pierce a dragon’s hide.”

Jon shook his head. “My sword is Valyrian steel,” he said, grim and hopeful all at once. “The queen can use her dragons to weaken him, bring him down, so that I may deliver the killing blow.”

“That is far too precarious of a plan,” Tyrion interjected hotly. “It is even more foolish the whole of this scheme to begin with.”

“What would you have me do, my lord?” Jon spat in return as he rounded on him. “It is the only hope we have.”
“No, it’s not,” Sam ventured forth into the conversation slowly. “We could-- well… I’m not sure about it, but it’s possible. I mean, we have dragonfire for the forge and we can gather all the--”

“Speak sense, Lord Tarly,” Tyrion barked, his patience having long since run dry.

Sam licked his lips, smiling in sheepish apology. “Well, it’s just that I came across the-- well I guess the recipe for Valyrian steel while I was studying at The Citadel, you see,” the man explained in a rush, fiddling with his hands. “And-- well-- I might’ve borrowed it. We could… well, we could make something… some sort of weapon for the queen and her dragons to kill this beast.”

A stunned silence greeted Sam’s words. Jon leaned forward on the table, looking at his friend incredulously. “You have instructions on how to make Valyrian steel?”

Sam nodded, blushing to the roots of his hair. “Aye, I do. It’s all in High Valyrian I’m afraid… but well…” he trailed off, nodding to the queen. “It seems we have an able translator.”

“And we have all we require to forge such a thing?” Daenerys inquired, slightly breathless.

Again, Sam nodded, looking bashful under the weight of so many eyes. “Aye, Your Grace. We have dragonfire, and a surplus of dragonglass… it’s-- well it’s possible… but I’m afraid the only thing we lack is a proper blacksmith to forge such a--”

“Gendry,” Arya interrupted, her eyes wide with sudden understanding. “Gendry can do it. I know it.”

“Gendry is here?” Jon asked, amazed and delighted in equal measure. Arya nodded in answer.

“I think you’re right,” Daenerys said to Arya with a knowing look. “Gendry is as skilled a smith as I have ever seen. He could do this, I know it.”

Tyrion shook his head, his previous triumph doused as good as a dying fire. “Say this Gendry fellow could actually manage to temper such metal,” he protested, as ever. “What exactly could he forge that would aid you in this quest? You cannot wield a sword or throw a spear, my queen, much less atop a dragon.”
There was a brief silence in the wake of this revelation, before Arya piped up again. “The Dragon Lords of Valyria used to equip their dragons with weapons,” she said, “They would fix blades to their claws-- they even armored them, long ago.”

Daenerys inclined her head to the woman, impressed. “You are correct, Lady Stark.”

“I can draw something up,” Arya offered, suddenly eager. “I just need… well I would just need some measurements, Your Grace. We can get started tonight.”

Deanerys smiled, true and grateful. “You do me great honor, my lady.”

With that and a small bow, Arya strode from the room.

“Well, I suppose we’re done here!” Tyrion exclaimed angrily.

Daenerys stepped forward, laying a hand on his shoulder. “This is the best thing for us and our people,” she said with a pointed glance to Jon opposite her. “Have you ever heard the saying ‘it’s not a great plan, but it’s the one we’ve got’?” She said, her tone gently mocking as she returned his own words to him. He felt himself darken, crossing his arms.

In his ire he lifted his chin to the youngest Stark, sitting placidly in his wheeled chair. “This all rests on you, my lord,” he spat bitterly. “You better be bloody right about this, or you have doomed us all.”

Bran smiled at him, wan and soulless. “I must speak to the king and queen alone,” he replied, thoroughly ignoring his veiled threat. “Sansa and Sam may stay. You and the others must leave.”

Tyrion glared at him incredulously. He turned to look at his Queen who seemed to be every bit as perplexed as he felt, but she nodded in agreement. Tyrion felt himself deflate as he reluctantly stepped away, nodding his head towards the door to the others. Bewildered and unsure, they all made their way to the exit. “Oh, and Lord Tyrion,” Bran called after him just as he grasped the handle of the door. “Please send for my sister. She must hear this as well.”

He nodded after a defiant pause, painfully unhappy with how a night he had already been sure
would be as difficult as anything he’d ever been tasked with turned out even worse than he had imagined. “My lord,” he muttered with a shallow bow before pulling the door closed behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Woo, boy. Sorry this took so darn long to get out. I had a heck of a week last week--plus this chapter was difficult for me.

I hope it was worth the wait. Thank you again for all your love and support! It motivates me! Come say hi @freshhexes on tumblr.

(Thanks again to the lovely hardlyfatal for stunt reading for me and teaching me the intricacies of proper capitalization. :))
The Dragon in the Dark

Chapter Summary

Bran’s words echoed empty and hollow through his mind, falling as weak and pale as ash at his feet. Whatever his true parents’ reasons, it did not change the consequences that their thoughtlessness had wrought-- decades of strife, of death and destruction. A continent ripped asunder.

“Every great gift exacts a great price.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She never much liked fur.

Furs were stuffy and stifling. She felt restrained-- trapped within her own body and she was never one for restraint. No, Cersei much preferred flexibility, freedom.

She thought it a strange sight, as she looked out her window that morning. King’s Landing laid before her veiled in a thin white robe-- red roof tiles turned a dull pink, yellow paving stones hidden under a gray sheath. The color had been sapped away. Even the sky hung dark and somber over the city.

The sight of snow and all that it meant had sent the common folk into a panic. Their minds locked in a battle of fight or flight-- bar the doors of their hovels and hope the looters and rioters spared their meager homes, or else join them in their plunder.

She had ordered the City Watch to swell their numbers with the very criminals they meant to lock away. Investigation and interrogation came in the form of clubs and daggers. Septons and low revolutionaries alike, preaching of the evil sorceress who sat the throne met their maker in Blackwater Bay. Proselytizers of a different sort were sent out, pockets heavy with gold and lips loose with the fear of dragonfire, the blackness of blood magic, the meanness of bastard blood. Whispers of the mutiny of the Lannister army were blotted out good as a candle. “The Queen has ordered her forces North, to take back the kingdom the pretender and bastard Jon Snow has stolen from her,” Qyburn had told her supplicants within the Throne Room.
Blood ran in the streets, red rivers slicing through the powdered white.

She despised them and their fear.

Every morning found her staring at her naked body in the silverglass, turning from side to side, searching for the changes. Swelling breasts and growing hips, the bulge of life residing in her belly. And every morning she would repeat his name like a prayer. A summoning and a damnation at once.

The racket of bells had greeted her today, interrupting her ritual. The Iron Fleet had returned to Westeros.

Her lips pressed into a mean smile as she turned away to greet their guests.

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“Would you please be still, Arya?” Sansa requested crossly from where she sat behind her desk, busily pulling thread and snipping fabric. “You’re driving me mad. And besides, you’re getting in my light.”

“What in the Seven Hells are you doing anyway?” Arya asked sourly as she reluctantly lowered herself into a chair. “How can you sew at a time like this?”

“What do you think of it?” Sansa responded, ignoring her questions as she did so well. Her sister managed a brief glance her way before her eyes settled back on her work. “About what Bran said?”

Arya let out a disbelieving bark of laughter at this. “You’re going to have to be a bit more specific.”

Sansa looked at her flatly, unamused. “You know what I mean.”

Arya turned her eyes away to gaze into the fire for a moment. “I think it makes sense,” she finally managed, her brow rumpled in thought. “But still-- the whole Fire and Ice thing… I don’t know about this whole prophecy business. I don’t know if I believe all that.”
Sansa’s eyebrows lifted agreeably at that. “It is a strange world we live in now, is it not? Prophecies and Three Eyed Ravens and Night Kings…”

“So you believe it?”

“I don’t think we have much of a choice,” Sansa returned after a small but heavy pause. Her hands stopped their work and her eyes floated to the far wall for a moment before turning her way, her face lined with exhaustion. “If what Bran says is true… the queen and Jon…”

“The Prince that was Promised,” Arya supplied, “The Prince that was Promised in both and in one alike… or something like that…” she trailed off in a frustrated huff, tipping her head back in defeat. Mysticism did not run well in her blood-- she had learned that long ago in the House of Black and White. She leaned forward, shaking her head in despair. “Robert’s Rebellion was all a lie. Our father, Sansa… he lied, all this time…”

“Aye,” Sansa sighed as she pushed herself from her chair, stepping around her desk to stand next to her. “Which is why we have to find Jon.” She held out her hand, offering her the fruit of her dogged labor.

Arya took it, unfurling the length of silk, studying it in wonder. “When did you start on this?” She looked up at her sister in question. “I know you couldn’t have done this all in a few hours.”

Sansa offered her a small, cold smile, lifting a shoulder. “Shortly after the queen came to us. I just… had a feeling.”

Arya looked up at her sister, something loving and fierce flaming up within her belly as she clutched the fabric closer. “Let’s go,” she said darkly. Sansa’s smile widened and she turned away to fetch her cloak.

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“Have you ever heard of… Az-- Az-hor As-a-hi…?” Sam asked his friend, stumbling mightily over the strange, Essosi name.
Bran turned to him, blinking in question.

Sam continued in the face of his nonplussed silence. “Says here he was some sort of hero-- a champion of the Red God.”

“Red God?”

“The Lord of Light. It’s who they worship in Essos-- well, in most of the Free Cities at any rate.”

“The Lord of Light…” Bran repeated thoughtfully. “What is it that this hero was supposed to have done?”

Sam looked back down at the manuscript he had been poring over for the past hour, squinting in the dim light. “Says here he… brought the light back in a time of great darkness. He forged a great sword, tempered in-- oh dear…” Sam faltered with a pained noise.

“A time of great darkness?” Bran inquired, his voice piquing in curiosity, ignoring Sam’s sudden fit of discomfort. “What does that mean?”

Sam shook his head. “It doesn’t really say. You know how these ancient stories go.”

Bran turned his face back to the fire, his brow crinkled in thought. “What else is there to be said… about this Azor Ahai?”

Sam leaned forward, a bit perplexed. He had not expected Bran’s seeming dogged fascination with this character of distant legend. Sam himself had only found it as a mild curiosity that he wished to share with someone, like finding a strangely colored stone in the garden. He cleared his throat, reading aloud from the book before him. “There will come a day after a long summer when the stars bleed and the cold breath of darkness falls heavy on the world. In this dread hour a warrior shall draw from the fire a burning sword. And that sword shall be Lightbringer, the Red Sword of Heroes, and he who clasps it shall be Azor Ahai come again, and the darkness shall flee before him.”

Sam and Bran often sat in easy silences these past few days since Sam had arrived, having found a common bond in bookishness and odd social sensibilities. But the quiet that met these words seemed to swell, pressing upon Sam’s ears as he looked over at his friend, whose gaze had drifted
somewhere very far away. Finally, Bran looked over at him, eyes sharp and flashing. “Sam, take me to the Godswood.”

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He wondered, idly, if the sculptor had truly captured his mother’s reputed beauty.

When he looked upon his father’s-- uncle’s -- statue, he could not help but think that they had not. The monument to Ned Stark stood strange and only vaguely familiar within the gloomy flicker of the guttering candles. He could only guess that the stone mason’s talent was but limited.

He looked down at the winter rose he cradled in his palm, plucked from the Glass Gardens in a moment of blurry assuredness when he had left that accursed hall and the heat of too many eyes. His mother waited for him, and he needed to bring a gift.

“A crown of blue winter roses… that is what  Rhaegar laid in your mother’s lap, Jon. And that is what started everything.”

He slammed his eyes shut, his mind caught in a vicious swirl as he considered tossing the bloom to the ground, stomping on it until the petals lay wilted and broken, smeared into the dust of the packed-in earth forever.

He looked back to Ned Stark’s stony visage, feeling his blood kick up and buzz in his ears. For all of his life, Jon had carried the heavy burden as the living, breathing reminder of Ned Stark’s one-time moment of weakness, the only mark upon his otherwise shining honor. A mistake sorely regretted.

“Our father did what he did to protect you, Jon. He did what he hated most-- he lied, and it saved your life. It saved all our lives.”

He turned back to Lyanna-- the woman he never knew, the woman whose beauty had started a war, the woman whose kidnap and rape were the foundation of the North’s enmity for the Targaryen name for as long as he had been alive.

And it all had been a lie.
He took in a great and quaking breath, placing the blossom he held in the open palm of the figure in front of him.

“Robert Baratheon did not love Lyanna Stark. It was injured pride in the face of a great love that sparked the flames of rebellion.”

Bran’s words echoed empty and hollow through his mind, falling as weak and pale as ash at his feet. Whatever his true parents’ reasons, it did not change the consequences that their thoughtlessness had wrought-- decades of strife, of death and destruction. A continent ripped asunder.

“All I’ve ever wanted was a mother,” he whispered into the dark, his voice wretched, limned with an old and familiar misery. “And now--” he stopped short, his throat clenching against the weight of the words burning in his mouth, jaws locked against a trapped scream. He closed his eyes, angry tears forging a defiant path down his face.

“You are neither Snow nor Sand, brother, but neither are you Stark. You are a trueborn Targaryen prince, heir to the Iron--”

Jon recalled, distantly, that he had roared some sort of wordless protest as Bran went on. Beside him, Daenerys had shook, just once, before looking to her hands and pulling her lips over her teeth to hide whatever plagued her in the wake of his anger. She would not look at him, and the absence of her eyes unmoored him-- setting him further into the frothing sea.

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“What do you know of Daenerys Targaryen?” Bran asked him, three nights after he had regaled him of the tales of Azor Ahai.

Sam shrugged, slightly helpless. “Well, not much really.” He sat down in front of the fire next to his friend, clutching a horn of ale.
“I wonder... how did her dragons come into the world?”

Sam shook his head. “Some people say that she killed her husband with blood magic, so that she may be granted with the power to command the sun to birth dragons so she could ride upon their backs and burn the world away.” He leaned back in his chair with a sigh. “But I feel those are stories invented by her enemies.”

“No one can command the sun,” Bran returned assuredly and thoroughly unironically. “Are there any other tales you have heard?”

Sam looked into the fire, a bit hopeless. “There are other tales, but I cannot ensure their veracity. I do not actually know this Dragon Queen.”

Bran nodded solemnly, his eyes flat and thoughtful all at once. “Do you know anyone who could recount her story to me faithfully besides the queen herself?”

Sam squinted, unsure of his friend’s fascination with the queen and the mythos that surrounded her. “I know that Jorah Mormont has served her since her marriage to the Great Khal,” he finally ventured. “I am sure he will be here when the queen arrives.”

Bran nodded, looking into the fire for a long, pensive moment. “I should greatly wish to speak to him, once the queen arrives.”

Sam blinked in shock but nodded. “I’ll see that you have an audience, my friend.” He cleared his throat nervously, leaning closer. “Forgive me, my friend, but can you not simply See Daenerys? Why not discover for yourself what is the truth of her.”

“The Sight is a great power, Sam, but the Sight is limited. I cannot See across the Narrow Sea--and neither can the Night King, I have come to suspect.”

Sam started at that, drawing back a fraction in his shock. “What makes you say this?”

“I have tried to See the queen’s past in Essos, but have failed. So, I turned to her birth on Dragonstone. I cannot See that either.” Bran paused, looking to his hands, his face puzzled. “The storm blocks me. It fights me, as if it is hiding something.”
“The storm… is hiding something?” Sam asked, trying to make his voice level and not pitched in condescension.

“Aye,” Bran replied. “Someone is not meant to know about the birth of Daenerys Targaryen, and every time someone has tried, the storm grows stronger.”

“The worst storm in living memory.”

Bran inclined his head. “The Night King has tried for decades to See who was born on Dragonstone that night, and has failed.”

Sam shook his head, his mind whirling. “What does it mean, then? What does any of this come out to?”

“Hope,” Bran replied, a rare hint of a smile lighting his lips. “Some bloody hope, Sam.”

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Dany paced in her chamber, turning the silver Targaryen pin over and over in her fingers in thoughtless worry.

“Ice and fire, brother. That is what you are-- what you are destined to be. Both of you.”

Missandei sat quiet and still, absorbing everything that her queen had just told her slowly, like a python settling to digest a sudden and ample meal. “So, it seems that you meeting the Lord Snow was more than a mere negotiation of military power,” Missandei finally ventured, voice slow and unsure, as if wrangling it out herself.

Dany looked to her hands, watching the fire glint off the luster of the dragon heads she held within her palm. “It would seem so,” she answered.

“And you are no longer alone, Your Grace. You are no longer the Last Dragon.”
“There is power here, Jon,” Bran said, looking between her and Jon heavily. “Between the both of you. The world has never seen its like. You and the queen-- your fates were hung with the stars long ago.”

Dany let out a pained breath, blinking as she looked up from the pin. “It would seem so,” she repeated, her voice a battered thing-- pulled rough and ragged through the black thorns of dread that sliced into her heart.

The power of what lay between her and Jon Snow had been undeniable from the start, though she had ardently attempted to push it away from her. It was a thrilling and terrifying thing, to have everything you ever really wanted to suddenly fall in your lap-- with eyes like obsidian and lips like the curl of a bow. It was much too dangerous.

She should have been more prudent, instead of falling into him like a spell. She should have handled this thing like the fatal tangle of thorns it was, instead of drinking the air from his lungs like the sweetest Arbor gold. She should have picked it up about the edges, holding it at arm’s length until she could find a safe enough place to rest it upon the earth and walk away forever.

She had never thought much of her death-- she had much more important things to concern herself with. She had always passively assumed it would be upon a bed, her skin gone papery with age. What she had never considered is her life becoming contingent upon that of another-- a glancing blow gone to rot, a duck under a sword a second too late, an arrow unseen-- all these cold, mundane things that could take him from her-- and she would perish with him. Sapped of her fire, standing amidst the ash of her country like a pale, shrunken tree.

And now, after he had slipped into her bloodstream like a drug, had wound his roots through every tendon and muscle, she had to rip him away from her like a bitter weed. It would leave her a broken and bloody mess, but she must do it. For the good of her house, for the good of the only thing that saved her, that brought her here in the first place.

“I fear that I have made a grave mistake, my friend,” Dany finally said into the gloomy, restless quiet that had reigned for an age. She watched as Missandei’s face fell in confusion. Dany straightened, walking to where her friend sat, taking up a seat on the couch next to her. “Bringing Jon Snow into my bed,” she explained, “bringing him into my heart.”

Missandei’s brows stitched together in both consternation and concern. “How is this so, Your Grace?” she asked breathlessly. “Especially after what you have told me-- about how you and the Lord Snow share a path in this world… would that not serve to strengthen your bond?”
“What he has failed to See,” Bran continued, undaunted. “Is that there are two pieces to this greater whole. A princess born beyond his reach, amidst the salt of the greatest storm in living memory... then again amidst the smoke of a great funeral pyre a world away.”

Dany bit her lip, closing her eyes though the tears ran hot and damning down her cheeks regardless. “Every great gift exacts a great price,” Dany whispered, echoing Bran’s words from what seemed like a lifetime ago now. “He is my great gift, Missandei, and the price is a bitter one.”

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“We knew you’d be down here,” the familiar voice of his youngest sister pierced through the fog of idle torment that had settled upon him like a heavy cloak.

He glanced her way, noticing with some resigned frustration that Sansa walked beside her, bearing a fresh torch. He supposed that that was a blessing, at least-- his own torch was near to sputtering out and leaving him in an even more dreary darkness. He’d much rather face the black crypts alone, at this moment, than to face his sisters... cousins.

“How are you, brother?” Arya asked after a small and tense silence as the women drew to either side of him.

“I wish to be alone,” he replied darkly, unable to look either of them in the face.

“You’ve been alone for hours,” Sansa countered dryly as she gazed up at the likeness of her aunt.

“Aye, not long enough,” he rebuffed, his voice taking on the edge of threat.

Sansa wedged her torch in an empty sconce on the wall with a sigh as Arya shifted nearer, placing an unsure hand within his own, though it was clenched tight as a vise. Sansa followed her lead with his left hand. A petulant, childish part of him wanted to wrench himself from their grasp, to snarl and push them away-- but the heat of their hands, even through the gloves, warmed him more than he could properly say and he found himself softening, if just a fraction.

“I know that you have longed for this moment, brother. And I know that this is not what you
expected. I cannot offer comfort, only truth.”

“Father used to say Lyanna was the most stubborn woman he’d ever met,” Sansa began, her tone light, conversational, “That she was headstrong, impulsive.”

“Aye,” Arya answered, “a lot like a certain brother we know.”

Jon looked between the two women beside him, faces calm, voices airy-- containing little of the festering wound he carried within his heart. “She had beautiful black hair, I remember Maester Luwin telling me,” Sansa continued.

“Father told me that she had brown eyes that were so dark, they were almost black,” Arya replied with a small smile.

Jon’s shoulders fell as he realized, all too slowly through the heavy haze that cocooned him, what this whole farce aimed to do. “I may liken to my mother... cousins--”

“Sisters,” Arya corrected crossly.

“I may liken my mother, sisters,” Jon pressed on, a bit loudly, “but that does not change anything.”

A stony silence met his words and Jon felt himself bristling under the good intentioned weight of their presence. He wished for nothing more than for them to be gone from him.

“Jon,” Sansa finally said softly, her tone taking on a shade of sadness that was not there before. “When I first saw you at Castle Black--” She stopped short, her voice snagging in her throat. She shook her head. “I never thought I would be happier to see anyone in my life. ‘That’s my brother,’ I thought to myself when I saw you. ‘And though I’ve been terrible to him, he still loves me, he will protect me.’” She turned to him, placing a hand on his shoulder and squeezing. “Nothing will take that away, Jon. You are still as much a Stark today as you were yesterday.”

“You were a Stark first,” Arya chimed in. “Your father was not a Stark, but your mother was. That still makes you as good as a brother to any of us.”
"You are much more than what you believe yourself to be, Jon. You must see it. You must embrace it."

Jon felt something warm and weighty swell in his chest despite his seeming determination to remain tormented forever. He closed his eyes, throat clicking as he pushed the sob pressing behind his lips back into his belly. He squeezed the hands tucked in both his own. “For as long as I can remember…” he ventured, his words as slow and dark as pitch, “I’ve only ever wanted to know of my mother-- of where I came from. If she thought of me, if she was alive or dead… if I was wanted or nothing more than a regret that needed tending to.” He managed to look up, taking in the form of his mother, immortalized in stone. Arya and Sansa stood silent and rapt, knowing better to interrupt him when he chose to speak at any length. “To know the truth now…” He took in a short and rasping breath. “I wish I would have never known.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Arya snapped, tugging on his hand. “You deserved to know just as much as anyone else. And Bran said-- well… you needed to know, Jon. The Night King thinks you’re the Prince that was Promised-- or whatever the hell it was…”

“Aye,” he replied angrily, scuffing a boot upon the ground. “Another pawn in his game.”

“You’re not,” Arya protested, eyes gleaming in the dying light like embers. “You’re not, Jon. You and the queen… if you work together, if we all work together, you’ll save us all.”

“You went to the queen, though I and everyone else told you not to,” Sansa pushed on. “You went, and now you stand together. You went…” she trailed off, looking away and taking a great, shaking breath. “And now we stand a chance.”

“And the blood of thousands was spilled for that chance, Sansa. Women and children, men and boys-- all dead because my parents loved each other.” He shook his head, a great buzzing rising in his ears like a swarm of insects. “Daenerys,” He began, the word ripped from his very heart like a buried arrow. “All of the dark things she has suffered… for what?” he spat, bile pressing at the top of his throat.

“A great gift exacts a great price.”

“For you!” Sansa nearly shouted, eyes blazing. “For her! For a chance.” Her voice echoed in the cold blackness of the crypts, falling like leaves into the charged silence that rang like ricochet in his ears. “I know that you feel guilty, brother,” Sansa said pleadingly, softening. “But you must know-- love did not spark Robert’s Rebellion. It was envy, Jon. Robert was denied something he wanted and so he burned down an entire continent to get it back.” She squeezed his hand, painfully
hard and he could only shut his eyes tighter, biting down on a shout of anguish. “Envy and evil may have started a war, brother, but love … love could end it.”

“That doesn’t change history, sister,” Jon replied coldly. “My parents let the world fall. My father set aside his lawful wife— he disinherited two children.” He spat the words out like the black thorns they were, shining dark and deadly at his feet. “So that I may one day fight a demon alongside my long-lost aunt?”

“Rhaegar, for all his promise, was a deeply superstitious man. He set his mind upon prophecies of greatness. Though he may have been misguided in his quest, brother, he was right about one thing.”

“Stop it,” Arya returned sourly. “Just stop it, Jon. You are here now— nothing you can do can change that.” He managed to meet her eyes and her face was shadowed and strange, looking ready for blood. “You can only ensure that all those who died and suffered did not do so for nothing.”

Jon met her words with silence, gazing unseeingly at the monument to his mother, feeling like he was floating somewhere just above his head like a ghost. His heart and mind fell blank and flat in the face of his torment— escaping into the dark recesses of his consciousness in helpless retreat.

Slowly, Sansa turned more fully to him, her eyes entreating and shining in the glow of the torches, the press of her hands growing a bit desperate now. She pulled something from her belt, holding it out to him within a shaking fist. Jon looked from her clasped hand back to her face questioningly, before reaching out and taking whatever her offering was from her hesitantly.

“It’s not finished,” Sansa said quickly before he had even unfurled the twist of fabric to have a proper look. “You are a Stark and Targaryen, brother. You needn’t choose.” A long and unsteady breath drew itself from her lungs. “And you needn’t feel ashamed.”

“Ice and fire,” Arya interjected as she watched him unwind the length of fabric slowly, her eyes eager.

Jon felt the blood flame up in his veins as he came to fully understand what he held within his hands. He let out a long, disbelieving breath as tears burned his eyes for the countless time that night.

The fabric was of delicate silk, dyed inky black and as wide as the spread of his palm. At one end,
crescent thread etched out the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen. At the other, fine white filigree showed the snarling face of the Direwolf of House Stark. In the middle of the ribbon the dragon sigil stood proud, with one small change-- the head of a Direwolf taking up the place of the middle dragon head, crowned with amber beads that glittered in the light of the fire. This was no mere decoration-- the cool weight of what tangled in his fingers was something much more than that-- a length of ribbon meant to hold and bind forever.

“Your meeting was fated, brother, Your Grace,” Bran declared with a nod to each of them in turn. “The Night King assumes it as nothing more than a military alliance. But it is something much more than that. And you must know to see it.”

“Father’s lies may hurt now, but he did it to save you,” Sansa whispered, her voice unsure and her eyes overtight. “He saved you out of love, but he did more than that, Jon.” Jon searched her face, breaths short and weak-- unable to fully fill his chest. “He did not know it-- but he saved all of us. You are here because of him and you found Daenerys--” she choked, shaking her head. “I’ve been such a bloody fool, Jon, I am so sorry.”

“The Night King has been fooled,” Bran intoned over the general clamor of his great revelation. “He searched for only a Prince, one made of the blood of the First Men and the Flame of Old Valyria. One born under a bleeding star whose very nature sang of Ice and Fire.”

Jon reached out a hand, suddenly desperate to comfort, despite his sister’s intention to do the same for him. He brought her brow to his own with a shaky sigh. “You have nothing to apologize for, sister.”

She barked a dark and mirthless laugh. “I’ve been cold to her for too long,” she gasped, tears running freely now. “And she has been our salvation this whole time… I am a fool.”

Jon ran a rough thumb over her pale cheek, brushing the tears away. A sudden… calmness came over him then as he smiled at her, small and sad. “What a burden it would be,” Jon murmured, “to bear this news alone, without sisters such as mine to set me straight.”

Arya stepped closer and wound her arms around his middle. “You are right bloody stupid when you want to be, brother,” she said, voice muffled against the leather of his hauberk.

He pulled them both closer, breathing out a tremendous, cleansing breath-- the last of the blackness leaving him as he clutched his sisters to him and looked up at the face of his mother.
Bran looked over at the both of them, his eyes flashing with a dangerous certainty. Something deep and primal echoed in his words as he spoke: “Ice and Fire, in one and both at once… you together are what was promised, and you together will end it all.”

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Tyrion felt his breath leave him, his very blood vanishing from his veins, in light of what the queen had just told him. All that was left to him was the slack grip he retained on the wine cup he held in front of him, the loud ringing in his ears.

Daenerys sat on the edge of her chair, taking prim and disinterested sips of her own wine, trying very hard to look nonplussed and detached. Tyrion knew better—could see the chords of her neck standing out like ropes, the white in her knuckles as they held her glass.

The fire in the hearth emitted a hearty snap and an ember leapt out, threatening to burn the rushes on the floor. Nerves already thoroughly frayed, Tyrion leapt from his chair with a strangled yell and kicked the burning jewel of wood back where it belonged. He looked back up to his queen, who was now staring at the small, black scar left behind on the straw, her eyes impossibly far away.

“I know you must be… shocked, my queen,” He said weakly as he took up his chair again. “But I thought this may be happy news— you are no longer the last of your house. I know well how much this burden has weighed on you.”

“Yes,” she replied mistily, eyes still distant, face instructable. “It is happy news for the future of my family’s name.”

“Forgive me, Your Grace, if I observe your seeming unhappiness,” he said carefully, knowing that his steps down this fraught path must be cautious lest he slip and fall into the anguish that seemingly simmered under her skin like an eager flame.

Daenerys looked away, a strange, dark expression manifesting itself on her face, cast in odd angles from the glow of the fire. “I cannot help him,” she said, the smallest twinge of pain revealed in her voice.

Tyrion blinked, not knowing how to properly handle this mysterious admission. “I think you’re mistaken in that, Your Grace. You have already helped Jon Snow immensely. And who better to
help him now? You are the only one who shares his blood. You are the only one who can properly
guide him down this new and strange path laid before him.” He paused, considering his next words
as he idly wondered if his queen was even properly hearing him. She sat in her chair, still as stone
and just as unreadable. “Though, I suppose this does complicate matters of the throne. But, Jon
Snow strikes me as a reluctant king. I am not so sure he would refuse the idea of abdication if we
talked to him properly. And, I know we have spoken of succession before with no proper answer—”

“Issues of the throne do not concern me, Lord Tyrion,” she cut across him like the crack of a whip.
“What concerns me are matters far more dreadful and important than who sits upon a chair.”

Tyrion shifted under the prickly weight of her gaze. “Forgive me, Your Grace, if I am slow to see
the nature of what troubles you.”

Daenerys looked down at her hands, gathering herself through sheer force of will. Tyrion had
never seen her look so tired— her shoulders sagged, the power in her limbs fleeing in the wake of
her exhaustion. “I left a man I thought I loved for the promise of an advantageous marriage, my
lord,” she said quietly, stolidly keeping her eyes from him though he doggedly searched them out.
“Under your wise counsel, I left him behind and it was as easy a thing for me to do as shucking a
cloak.”

The silence that filled the space between them shifted, turning thorny and treacherous. He shifted
forward in his chair, his brow rumpled in concern and question in equal measure. “So you mean to
marry Jon Snow,” he said slowly. He couldn’t deny that the same thought had not occurred to him
— it was as good of a match as he could hope to find for his queen— the love they shared only
being a happy circumstance that would make such a union much easier than he could have wished.
Alas, with all the dark things and dread tidings they had had to attend to, a royal wedding was not
something he had felt up to planning just yet. “I can’t deny that I am just a bit frustrated at only
being told this, but I do think it a smart match. Though, I do think that we should wait until—”

“There will be no such match,” Daenerys interrupted once again. This time, her voice was soft,
rounded and sodden with sadness. “I cannot marry the only person capable of bearing our name
through the ages, my lord. It is a fantasy, me and Jon Snow.”

Tyrion felt himself deflate like a bellows, the wake of her words and the despair they carried
soaking into him like venom. “Your Grace, as I have said before… there are other ways to name an
heir. Other methods to ensure succession.”

“You aim to comfort me, my lord, and I am grateful, but you must know that this is more
important than whatever lies between me and Jon Snow,” she replied, her voice near a whisper,
eyes deep and dark with a nameless torment. “You once wondered what would happen if my
desires and my duties did not so easily mingle— this is the answer to your worries.”
The memory of the conversation aboard the ship flooded his mind and he felt an overwhelming bout of shame in the wake of it. He shook his head, endlessly aggrieved. “I did not counsel the denial of your happiness, my queen,” he countered, his voice rusted over with regret.

She shook her head, just once, as she looked to the floor. A tiny, bitter smile wound itself over her lips. “I shall be happy, my Lord,” she replied, voice impossibly quiet. “I shall rule in Aegon Targaryen’s stead if he so wishes, and I shall live to see the restoration of my house. Nothing would bring me more joy than to name whatever child he may beget to reign after I am gone.”

“Your Grace…” Tyrion started, unsure of where to tread. He knew, in some black corner of his heart, that what she spoke was true— but the words she spoke were wrought from the old world… the world she sought to burn away like blight so she may grow something good and green from its ashes. He felt the wild urge to comfort her— his queen so fresh from mourning the loss of a child, now grieving the death of a great happiness before she even had the chance to truly know it. “You forget that Jon Snow loves you too,” he finally said, voice cracking like a wasting cinder. “He loves you more than you properly see. He will not so easily set you aside. Most especially to carry on a family name that he has no true love for. He grew up a Stark, Your Grace. It is the only family he has ever known.”

The queen shook her head, suddenly pulled taught with a visage he knew well— a monarch fit to command and not to be rebuked. “I am his queen, lest you forget, my lord. He will do as I command.”

Tyrion felt a sudden jolt of anger, a pulse of disgust, shake him to the roots of his hair. He pushed himself to his feet, striding to where she sat and met her level gaze with his own, though he felt his heart pound in his ears. “You would sell Jon Snow off to a woman he does not want like a brood mare?”

“Jon Snow is a good and comely man, my lord, women would be likely to tear out their own hair to wed him. Lord Manderly has already offered his own—”

“Were you not so commanded to take an unwanted husband?” He interrupted hotly. “Was it not being sold like a horse to the highest bidder one of the very things you have been working so hard against?”

Her face fell into grim lines of dark realization. She folded her hands tightly in her lap and the light that kindled in her eyes was something queer— something he had not seen before. “I can’t deny the truth of your counsel, my friend, but this must be done.”
Tyrion shook his head, taking up one of her hands in both his own. “Please, my queen, whatever your decision, do not do this thing lightly.” He squeezed her cold knuckles, hard as iron within his palms. “Do not command a man to do such a thing. You see Jon Snow as a equal. Treat him as such.” He shook his head in despair, casting about for something that may change her mind. “Besides, from what you have told me, it seems as though you and Jon Snow were fated--”

“To fight together, perhaps,” Daenerys cut across him, voice as cold as the frost that clung to the window panes. “Lord Stark said nothing of love, my lord.”

Tyrion closed his eyes, shaking his head ardently. “Yes, but you and Jon Snow are in love, my queen.”

“I’ve made my decision,” Daenerys replied, as lifeless as the stone under his feet.

“As you wish, Your Grace,” Tyrion croaked, after a long hesitation, He stepped away from her, feeling odd and vile and uncomfortable in his own skin. He felt as though he stood before a stranger.

“It is late, my lord,” she said, her voice as feeble as a guttering flame. “We all should rest for what awaits us tomorrow.”

Tyrion bowed shallowly, his heart hanging heavy and cold in his chest. He turned for the door but halted at his queen’s voice. “Lord Tyrion.” He turned to face her and she looked at him dully, all the fire gone out of her. “Send the Lord Snow to me, after the meeting tomorrow. I trust in your discretion in this matter.” Tyrion nodded stiffly, turning to leave again.

He paused after pulling the door to her chamber closed behind him, eyes questing for an impossible answer from any dim corner he could find in the dim corridor where he stood. Finally, he made up his mind with a decisive nod, turning and striding down the hall.

He must find Varys.

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Davos awoke that morning with the distantly familiar knot of a headache— a dull throbbing that meant far too much rum the night before.

He had not felt such a dreadful thing in nearly two decades— the unsteady limbs, the sullen sleepiness. He now fully appreciated why he had sworn off drink long ago. But the lure of merriment with Tormund and the Hound proved too great to ignore. After the... excitement of the war council and the shock of what Sansa had recounted to him after their meeting with Brandon Stark... well, even the most steadfast man would yearn for a drink or two.

He walked to the Great Hall that morning, bleary-eyed and somber. He met Lord Tyrion standing nervously at the doors with Lord Varys. They were the first to arrive.

“Good morning, my lord,” Tyrion greeted. “Did you rest well?”

“Aye, a bit too well, Lord Tyrion,” he replied.

Tyrion inclined his head good naturedly. “I know well of what you speak, Ser. Come, we have some time before the wolves arrive. Shall we talk strategy and get you something for that headache?”

Davos nodded in gratitude. “Aye, that sounds like just the plan.”

They made their way to the head table as servants hurried about, placing flagons of water and ale on the the two tables lining the room. Tyrion called for a plate of broiled eel and a dark ale. “Eel is the best for hangovers, Ser. I know better than most,” he said with a sniff as he settled in his chair. “And it is best to fight fire with fire, I’ve come to find.”

Varys emitted a small, knowing laugh at this as they took up their seats.

Davos had come to a reluctant fondness of the dwarf and his eunuch companion. He knew his bias well tainted his initial judgement— but they had proved themselves to be far too clever of a duo for him to swear off altogether. Davos found some small comfort, aligning himself as he did for the good of his king and his newest ally.

“Ser Davos,” Tyrion began. “You know the North better than most. What are our chances of having a peaceful reception?”
Davos lifted his eyebrows at that. “The same chances I have for killing the Night King.”

Varys hummed, amused. “Stranger things have happened, my lord,” he said as a servant arrived with the eel and beer. “But I take your point.”

“Well, I suppose we have planned for the worst since the beginning,” Tyrion returned airily, pouring himself a glass from the only pitcher of wine. “The King in the North, telling his stubborn lords that he intends to bend the knee.”

“He will only do that if pressed,” Davos said thickly through a chunk of eel. “We’ve spoken at length about this, sailing for White Harbor. We must galvanize the lords first, make them truly see what comes for us all. Then hopefully warm them to a strange woman whose name they hate.” He wiped his mouth with his wrist and looked over at the other two men. “Only then will they be receptive to such news.”

“Seems easy enough,” Tyrion quipped dryly as he leaned back in his chair.

“We could omit such information,” Varys offered, “We need them behind us for the war to come. The news of their king declaring for a queen they have little love for before they truly see who she is-- flattery and talk might not be enough.”

“Jon will not allow it,” Davos protested sternly as he finished the last of his meal. “He knows what bending the knee means for his people-- he asks them to fight in a war they have no interest in, to die for a queen they do not know or love. He wishes to tell them so they may know, before they are asked to marched south.”

“What choice do they have?” Tyrion asked irritably, spreading his hands in question. “Will they rise up in revolt? Abandon their king in his gravest hour?”

Davos shook his head. “From what I have seen of the northern lords, my lord, is that they are willful to a fault. Nothing can be taken for granted when treating with them.”

Tyrion’s face turned dark as he pursed his lips in thought. “We do have Lady Mormont on our side, the queen tells me.”
Davos nodded at that. “Aye, and she bloody well knows how to put a score of stony northern lords into their places, my lord.”

“That is the best thing I have heard in weeks, Ser,” Tyrion returned. He leaned forward in his chair, looking at Davos questioningly. “What were the reasons for Lady Mormont’s agreeable reception of the queen?”

“Well, she cited what happened beyond the Wall, my lord.” Davos answered. “And we should do the same—earnest and often. The northerners are a prickly bunch, but they admire courage above all else.”

“I suppose it is fortunate, then, that we have such a grand tale to deliver to our would-be allies,” Varys said with a pointed glance at Tyrion.

“What of this most recent news?” Tyrion pressed on with a tired look to Varys, “Surely we cannot reveal this now?”

Davos shook his head. “My king wishes to wait to reveal such a thing until the great war is won, and I agree.”

Varys nodded, his face angled in approval. “Aye, my lord. I believe that to be a most prudent decision.”

Tyrion shifted irritably in his chair, folding his hands in front of him. “Do you not think the Northern lords would be more receptive to a Targaryen if they came to know that their own king was also of the same blood?”

Davos inclined his head, chewing on a stray bone from the eel worriedly before pulling it from his teeth and placing it on the plate before him. “I see where you may think that, my lord, but I think it too much to place upon them all at once. Jon Snow bending the knee and an undead dragon bearing down upon them with every passing hour— I am not so sure that such news would be well received under such circumstances.”

Tyrion tilted a hand up in question. “And when will the circumstances improve, Ser?”

Davos opened his mouth to reply when the doors of the Great Hall opened with a noisy clang. A
great many people streamed in—Lord Umber And Lady Karstark, Lords Glover, Cerwyn, Manderly— and all sundry. All looked stone-faced and grim as a winter sea as they lined up along the walls. He looked on as Daenerys and Jon strode in together, shoulders nearly brushing. Jon looked as if he hadn’t slept in days— his eyes bruised with weariness and face pale as ash. The Queen did not look to have fared much better— eyes looking puffy and rimmed with red. Davos felt his blood run cold— the king and queen in such a state did not bode well for smooth negotiations.

They were flanked by their regular retinue-- the Hound, Brienne, Jorah, Tormund, Missandei, Grey Worm, Sansa, Arya, and Ghost-- the group somehow having mutated into a single unit since the king’s arrival in Winterfell. Davos had been the one to advise such a dramatic entrance and watching it unfold now— it indeed sent a strong image. He could only hope that it would encourage affection, rather than engender distrust.

The king and queen took up their chairs, looking as tense and murderous as Davos had ever seen. A great rustling of many bodies answered in kind as the multitudes assembled followed their lead.

Davos glanced over at Jon to his left. The man sat, looking over his subjects quietly for a moment before speaking. Davos had also advised against any heraldry or long listings of titles. “My lords, my ladies, I welcome you all to Winterfell again. I know your journeys have not been kind and my demands many. I thank you all for your time and effort.”

His words were met with a general murmur of superficial thanks. Jon stood up, leaning his fists upon the table before him, cloak gathered about his shoulders like a crown— that had been Tyrion’s idea. “I gather you here on this day to entreat your help, to ask you to stand with me and my family in this great war to come,” Jon continued. “Please, my friends, feel free to speak as equals here. I welcome all words of wisdom.”

With that, he took up his chair again. Davos nervously scanned the crowd gathered before them-- all stony and silent, for a short time.

“Are you not going to introduce us to this Dragon Queen who sits beside you, my king?” Robbett Glover asked hotly, looking at Daenerys with a poorly hidden sneer.

“I am Daenerys Targaryen, my lord,” Daenerys offered calmly, simply, properly flummoxing the Lord Glover into a reluctant silence as a quiet rumble of laughter whispered through the room.

“Why should we trust you?” A faceless voice asked from the crowd. “The Targaryens have not been kind to the North.”
Davos watched as many of those gathered pounded their fists approvingly on the tables before them. Lord Hornwood took to his feet. “The North defends the North!” He cried with an upraised fist. “We will not sit back while some foreigner who calls herself a queen conquers our land!”

“Aye!” Another voice chimed. “She comes here with dragons! She will burn us all— just like her father!”

A great tumult erupted from all gathered as men shouted and pounded their fists, chairs and benches screeching as they pushed themselves up onto their feet in a sudden fervor.

“Enough!” Jon bellowed as he lunged from his chair. The hall fell deadly silent and Davos looked on as the chords of his king’s neck stood out like the roots of a tree— his face flushed and eyes flashing dangerously. “The queen is a guest here and I will not sit back and listen to you speak of her in such a way!”

“A guest, aye,” Lord Royce returned sourly. “But for how long, Your Grace? How long before she is a ruler to kneel before rather than a guest?”

“You bloody fools!” Tormund blurted, face almost as red as his beard. “Are your peckers so small you would rather join a bloody undead army than accept help from a bloody woman?”

“You will not speak so, wildling,” Lord Glover spat.

“I will speak, lord, because I possess more sense in the tip of my cock than you have in the whole of that feeble—”

“Tormund,” Jon snarled warningly. The man stilled, sitting back in his chair like a chided child.

About as good of a start as I could have imagined, Davos thought wryly to himself.

“Your brother lost his head because of a foreign woman,” Lord Hornwood ventured, his face grim and determined. “The North cannot withstand that again.”
“Aye, a foreign whore.”

Davos looked on as Jon’s face flushed with rage, leaning his face close to him and whispering with barely contained violence. “Find whoever said that and bring them to me when this over.”

Sansa stood amongst the chaos, looking beautiful and imperious and, frankly, quite put out. “Do not be fools, my lords,” she nearly shouted, the gathered lords quickly foaming to a boil before her. “Robb was my brother, just as Jon is, but that is where the similarities between the two end.”

“How can you say such a thing?” Lord Hornwood protested. “It is like watching history repeat itself before my very eyes.”

“Then you are slower than what has been rumored, Lord Hornwood,” Sansa quipped calmly. “Talisa Maegyr, unlike Daenerys Targaryen, had no armies and no dragons to help my brother fight his wars, my lord. And to only further the point, my brother Jon has entered into no marriage pact that may anger some powerful people if he betrayed that trust.” The woman stood still and cool as a millpond, staring down a man almost double her age until he faltered, hanging his head and stepping back.

Davos dragged his eyes down the line of those gathered at the high table. The queen looked up at Sansa with a proud and satisfied smile barely ghosting her lips, while Jon stared at his sister with a faint mystification. Tyrion looked on, adoring. “I understand the misery that my brother’s decision has caused the North and those who loved him, my lords. I do… better than most… but do not give into blindness and see the same thing when the two could not be more different than a fish and an oak tree.” With that, she sat down, looking all the world as if she had done nothing more than announce what they would be having for supper that night.

Jon nodded thankfully to his sister, the lords properly cowed before him. “I am demanding much of you, I know, my lords and ladies. But I would only ask so much under such dire circumstances… What we face out there is like nothing we have ever known. They do not come for spoils, for holdfasts or fields. They come for blood to swell their ranks. And Daenerys Targaryen is our only hope against it.”

“I have heard you speak of these Undead for months, my king,” Lord Manderly spoke up, not unkindly. “I aim to believe you, of course, but it is a hard thing to reconcile with everything I’ve known to be true. Perhaps some of my fellow lords’ and ladies’ hesitation is seeded by this same worry.”

Jon nodded, considering, looking faintly miserable as he searched for an answer to Lord
Manderly’s concerns. Davos was just beginning to lean forward to advise his king as to what to say when Daenerys rose to her feet. “My lords, my ladies, If you would for a moment indulge me.” Everyone gathered shared confused glances before she went on. “Who here among you have been North of the Wall?”

A deathly, abashed silence met this question as the nobility of the North looked on as Daenerys Targaryen raised her dainty hand along with their king and a select few others-- all sat behind the high table. Davos felt himself swell with pride as Daenerys lowered her hand with the tinge of a triumphant smirk. “Perhaps, my lords and ladies, it is time to reexamine you perspective.” She paused, letting her words sink in like a slow working poison before she held a hand out towards Jon Snow. “I once doubted your king, and I paid a dear price for such ignorance. I advise that you do not make my same mistakes.”

Davos watched as Jon’s eyes tracked her-- pulled by a lodestone-- as she lowered herself back in her chair. Davos had half a mind to kick the leg of his chair to snap him out of it. Even after that and Sansa’s impassioned entreaty, Davos seriously doubted such a display could help their case.

The calm that met the queen’s speech heartened Davos-- but only for a moment. Lord Glover, looking ever more miserable, stepped forward. “Do not be fooled, my lords and ladies, she speaks of only one side-- she would not help us so willingly if something was not promised in return.”

Worried whispers spread through the crowd like the scattering of locusts. Davos watched as Jon's shoulders fell, taking a moment to gather himself before lifting himself to his feet heavily. Davos saw Daenerys lift a hand, instinct pulsing through her to offer a bracing touch-- before she halted, tucking the hand back into her lap.

They weren’t going to make this easy for him.

“When the Great War is won-- the North will march alongside Daenerys Targaryen--” Jon stalled as the crowd before him erupted in outrage. “The North will march alongside Daenerys Targaryen and will abide under her rule when she takes the throne!” He pressed on loudly, nearly shouting over the tumult that his words had wrought.

“Traitor!”

“You’ve betrayed us!”
“Never trust a bloody bastard!”

“And what will you do?” Jon bellowed, voice taking on a queer and crazed edge Davos had never heard from him before. The room quieted, all eyes turned to their king, struck mute with shock. “Words are wind, my lords. Tell me it is that you intend to do to win this war.” Jon paused, seeming to look upon every face gaping up at him from below. “Please, my friends, I long to hear of these clever plans— the bounty of ideas you have to save our realm… I crave nothing else.” Jon halted again, allowing his words to properly sink in. Davos could have heard the scurry of a mouse upon the planks of the hall, it was so quiet. “Make no mistake, my lords, the queen and I will push on without you. We will win this war and do your fighting for you as you cower and shiver in your castles. And then, my lords, all you have to do is wait— wait until the queen and the country she has won come to collect their debt.”

The silence in the hall took on a different form— shifting in on itself, curling and bristling like a porcupine. “Tell me truly, my lords and ladies,” Jon continued, “that I did not make a mistake when I took you for men and women of the North— and not green boys that piss themselves at the first smell of blood.”

The stillness that met his words was as charged as a thunderhead. All those gathered blinked owlishly at their king, locked in a shocked stupor. Davos inwardly cursed, not knowing what had possessed Jon to speak to his subjects so. He chanced a glance to his king, who looked back to him quickly, looking as worried as he felt. Daenerys shifted in her chair, swallowing as an unmistakable blush crept up her neck. Tyrion seemed to be preparing himself to mitigate what might have been done when the scrape of a chair sliced through the thickening quiet like a knife.

Lady Lyanna stepped forward, her face dark, mouth thin-- looking fit to rend flesh from bone. “Are we bloody cowards?” she asked the crowd at large. “Are we bloody cowards?” she repeated fiercely in the face of the silence that met her. A sounding ‘no’ echoed through the hall. “Do you know what this foreign whore, as you so named her, did for your king?” she spat, anger making her words quake. “It is a debt we could never hope to repay and you sit here mewling like children, measuring your cocks while our king and this foreign whore,” she snarled bitterly, “fight for you and your worthless hides.” She spat upon the ground, aimed squarely at the boots of Lord Glover.

She stepped slowly through the throng of men double her age, staring them all down, one by one, like a warden deciding which prisoner to punish that day. “I never thought I’d see the day I would be ashamed to call myself a woman of the North.” She rounded on the balls of her feet, pointing to the king and queen, sitting still as stone behind the table. “We named Jon Snow our king despite his name, despite his birth and now you spit upon a woman come to save us all for the very same thing we overlooked in our king.” She looked up to the high table, her face alight with something strange and savage. “House Mormont will not abandon our king or the North in its gravest hour.” She turned back to face the rest of the hall. “And if you bloody well call yourselves men and women of the North neither will you.”
The hall suddenly came alive with the sound of fists pounding upon tables, the rattle of metal on wood as the flagons and goblets reverberated in their wake, the scrape of chairs and benches, the shouts of many mouths.

Davos rose slowly to his feet, letting the racket come to its natural end after a moment. “I know this is a grave thing to hear, my lords and ladies,” he began, hands folded behind his back. “I know you named Jon Snow your king so you would not have to kiss the boots of some faraway ruler ever again.” An excited murmur of agreement rippled through the room like a warm breeze. Davos held up a stilling hand, the racket falling away. “But you also named Jon Snow your king to stand beside you, to fight for you and protect your homes, your families— all that is good and green in this world. And I can only say that he did just that. He kept his word to you as best as he knew how.” He shifted on his feet, pointing to Daenerys. “Your king did not bend the knee out of fear or intimidation-- bribery or manipulation. He refused her for weeks. He bent the knee to her because she bloody well earned it. The woman who sits before you now earned your king’s trust and she will earn all of yours, in time. But until then, you must trust in your king. The man who earned it from all you hard sons of bitches in the first place.”

A tremendous cheer rose up from the crowd and Davos looked over his shoulder to Jon and Daenerys and the rest of the company. Jon and the queen shared a pleased look. Tyrion leaned forward, looking amused. “Now you’ll never shut them up,” he yelled over the noise, “we must talk strategy, remember?”

Davos clapped his hands together as he turned back to the throng. He scanned the room, carefully taking inventory, sussing out any that may be a bit less than enthusiastic about how the morning had developed. His eyes paused on the Lord Glover, casting his sour gaze around at his fellow nobles with barely concealed disdain. Davos marked it down in his mind like ticking off a ledger before turning his attention back to the room at large. “Oy, you lot, are you ready to talk war?”

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“Lord Snow,” Tyrion called after his retreating form, “a word?”

Jon Snow halted as if caught on a tripwire. Tyrion knew well why-- he had been in the midst of practically chasing after the queen, who had rose and left almost before Davos had declared the meeting adjourned. Jon peered at him over his shoulder with some suspicion and no small amount of irritation. He finally relented and turned to stride back to where Tyrion stood at the end of the high table, glancing at the doors. “How can I be of service, my lord?”

Tyrion waited as the last of the lords and ladies and all sundry finally filtered out of the room, Jon eyeing him impatiently the whole while. When he was sure they were alone, Tyrion took in a bracing breath. “The queen requests an audience.”
Jon shifted on his feet, leaning back slightly, eyes narrowed in confusion. “She sends you instead of seeking me out for herself?” He shook his head in anguish. “We were just in the same bloody room and she took off like an arrow.”

“This is a particularly… delicate matter,” Tyrion began slowly, now realizing that he had perhaps underprepared for this farce, as Jon was already far more agitated than Tyrion had initially estimated. “She wished to keep to propriety as a result.”

“Propriety?”

Tyrion bounced nervously on the balls of his feet, face twitching. “It is a matter of state and… succession.”

Jon shook his head, as if a fly had started buzzing in his ear. “Succession?”

Tyrion nodded. “With you being a true-born son of Rhaegar Targaryen, the queen deems it important to speak to you about the throne.”

“I don’t want the bloody thing, if that’s what she’s worried about,” Jon spat, his mouth creased in a bitter line, looking more and more pained with every passing word.

Tyrion shook his head with a small, sad smile. “This is not what troubles her.”

“Then what can she possibly have to discuss with me that she cannot seek me out for herself?”

Tyrion took in a great breath, steeling himself from the wroth he knew awaited him. “She wishes to discuss the matter of a marriage, my lord, befitting a man of your station and name, so you may produce a child she will name her heir.”

The silence that met his words could scarcely be contained within the Great Hall they stood in. “A… marriage?” Jon finally asked, voice weak and wrecked. “Forgive, my lord, but— am I to believe that the queen wishes to… set me aside?”
Tyrion nodded, looking to his boots. “The queen told me of the soft engagement you had agreed upon, but in the face of her… inability to produce an heir of your blood and in light of recent revelations, she has placed affection aside in the light of the duty to see her family name carried past her living days.”

Jon stepped closer to him and Tyrion could almost hear the man’s muscles winding like rope on a pulley, the creak of his teeth between his jaws. “You did this,” he growled, his eyes flashing dangerously. “You’ve never approved of us. You told her to do this. You are her Hand, she trusts you.” The word ‘trust’ was spat like a nasty slur—meant to inflict pain and guilt in the light of what Jon Snow saw as a great betrayal of her faith.

“Aye, she does,” Tyrion said coolly as he looked into Jon’s scowling face. “But not in this matter, I’m afraid.” Jon’s eyes flickered, the deadly fire that raged within them quieting. “I advised her most ardently against it.”

The man blinked, stepping away from him slowly, looking as lost as a sparrow caught in a whirlwind.

“Quite the contrary, I have very little qualms about the affection you and the queen share, Lord Snow. My only reservations being the possible political ramifications and the general… poor timing of it all.” Tyrion ventured delicately, carefully choosing his words. “Indeed, I am of the belief that you both make quite a fearsome pair. And the more I see you two together, the more I believe that you both upon the throne would be the best possible thing this wretched world could ever hope to see.” He sighed sadly, shoulders sagging, exhaustion suddenly soaking into his very marrow. “So with much consulting and reflection, I have decided to set aside my queen’s command.”

Jon narrowed his eyes in question and suspicion, but said nothing.

“The queen sent me to request your audience, and in that I have done my duty,” Tyrion explained within a sigh, “but she also commanded discretion, which I have thoroughly betrayed, I’m afraid,” Tyrion replied with a hint of a rueful smile.

Jon shook his head, still disbelieving. “Why would you disobey your queen?”

“The same reason you would, Jon Snow, if she so commanded you to find another wife,” Tyrion replied sharply. He watched as Jon reeled, leaning a palm on the table, as if he had struck him. “You and I both love the queen, though our affections maybe of a different ilk, and you and I both know that she is making a grave mistake.”
Jon stood before him, looking pale and dazed, his breaths coming in rough and labored. “Why do this, my lord? Why tell me these things? Why betray your queen’s confidence?”

Tyrion looked down at that, considering carefully, tilting his head. “Because I once was the victim of a thwarted love, my lord,” he finally supplied, looking back up at him, mouth downturned in a sad, knowing frown. “Two, actually. And as long as I am able, I aim to see that no other must suffer such a fate.”

Jon simply stared at him, sodden and limp as soaked sailcloth. He shook his head, helpless. “What am I to do?” he asked breathlessly. “What am I to do, my lord? If this is her wish—”

“I never took you for one to surrender so meekly, Jon Snow,” Tyrion cut across him, words honed to a deadly edge as he stepped closer to him. “Tell me, did I have it wrong when I assumed you loved her?”

“No, my lord, but—” Jon stammered, clumsy and bewildered in the wake of Tyrion’s wrath.

“So then I must have been wrong in assuming that you would break your own bones before seeing harm befall her.”

“Of course not—”

“Then who stands before me now?” Tyrion asked hotly, baring his teeth, feeling bold and terrified in equal measure. “Who is this wilting maid who wets my boots with her tears? I thought I stood before the Lord Commander, the King in the North, the son of Rhaegar Targaryen— but I see now I must have been mistaken.”

Jon gazed at him, eyes deepening to a shade as dark as tar, nostrils flaring. His hands shook at his sides— he looked ready to taste his blood in his mouth, to tear him limb from limb. “Careful, my lord.”

“And why should I be careful? When you shrink so from your duty?” Tyrion asked mildly, striving to tamp down the fear that crept up his spine. He never truly considered the danger that resided behind Jon Snow’s heart— an ashy bed of coals that just needed one good blast of wind to send him alight. A true Targaryen after all. “Do you truly believe that this is what the queen really wishes of you? Do you truly believe that she does not want you any longer?”
Jon shook his head, biting out a quiet *no* between his teeth. There was a small pause before he hung his head, taking in a great, gasping breath. “*No,*” he repeated, slamming a fist upon the table, a flame of love and anguish trailing the word like the tail of a comet.

Tyrion stepped toward him, his mouth downturned, his voice solemn and quiet. “She trusts me,” he said to him quietly, his tone and stance softening, “but I can’t help but think that she has grown to trust you and your counsel just as much, if not more.”

Jon looked at him, jaw set in rigid determination and Tyrion could not help the small bloom of relief that opened in his chest like a new flower. “Tell the queen she may find me in the Godswood,” Jon declared darkly.

Tyrion bowed. “Thank you, my lord.” He stepped off the dais, making for the door, his steps just a bit lighter than they were before. “Mention my name, if you must,” he called to Jon over his shoulder, still standing frozen and tense at the table, “but I would like to keep my head for a while longer yet.”

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Dany had woken that morning queasy and uncomfortable, barely touching the boiled egg Missandei served in her chamber, retching into her chamber pot twice before she felt that she could rise to dress. Her stomach had continued its rebellion throughout the day-- churning like a mill wheel, making her feel off balance-- frail. “You must eat, Your Grace,” Missandei had entreated, “today will be a long day indeed.”

Dany had simply wiped her chin with her wrist, sitting up more fully in her chair so Missandei may continue her work of braiding her hair. “I believe that is why my stomach is protests so, my friend,” she had returned coolly. “My nerves are frayed.”

She had gone out to meet Drogon and Rhaegal, who had made themselves nests in the Wolfswood about two leagues south. She took the measurements promised to Arya and Gendry with the knotted twine Arya had given her. She had lingered with them too long, stroking their glassy scales and singing to them, idly wishing she could reside here with them forever. Brienne and Jorah had to entreat her to come along, standing nervously next to their horses-- she was to face down the Northern lords with all their sneers and japes in only an hour.

But she had saved her most fell duty that day for last.
Jon was to leave in a matter of hours for Castle Black, with two hundred Unsullied and a hundred more riders-- volunteers from his bannermen’s forces. She would follow in three days time, arriving in Mole’s Town on the fourth day-- the journey to Mole’s Town only a quarter of what it would be on horseback from atop Drogon. She had come here to bid him farewell, in more ways than one.

Though it was close to midday, the sky remained sullen and gray, the weak sun piercing through the bare branches of the Godswood in shafts of shimmering silver-dust.

She padded as quietly as she could through the soft loam-- the snow lighter here, the frost weaker, the hot springs keeping this pocket of forest within the cold stone castle walls locked within a perpetual state of early spring. Ghost trotted along in front of her, panting in his haste to reach his master, but pausing every few steps for her to catch up. She felt cowardly, treading so slowly, but she was reluctant to break the blissful spell that had fallen upon them in the past weeks. Her thoughts wandered, meandering into happier times.

“Sometimes I feel that I’ve dreamed him up,” she said quietly into the gathering dark. The creak of timber and the sloshing of sea were the only sounds for a moment as her friend bit back a smile and leaned forward from her chair.

“I believe you once told me, Your Grace, that your dreams have a habit of coming true.”

She grinned as Missandei allowed herself a satisfied chuff. “I think I may aim to dream up more things about him then.”

Dany closed her eyes as she willed one foot in front of the other, powerless against the grief that swamped her heart as good as the tide. She had always dreamed of a family, once. And here it was, blooming as real as a rose before her very eyes and she could not rejoice in its reality.

Ghost found Jon Snow, knelt within the tangled roots of a great ghostly tree, leaves red as blood-- undaunted by the chill of winter. He sat with Longclaw upright between his legs, both hands grasping the pommel and head bent to its crossguard as if in prayer.

Dany stopped short, not wanting to sully the vision before her-- the pale branches of the tree stretched like the arms of supplicants around him, the silver-glass pool steaming like broth before him, the pale creature of ancient and unknown forests sat beside him like a sentinel. The fur of his Northern cloak crowned his shoulders as he clutched the blade of a Northern house and spoke
noiseless words to the gods of his father.

The beauty of it stole the breath from her, replacing it with a blackness she did not know how to fully wield. His father may have been a Targaryen, but his features, his very being was etched deep within the lichen of the moors, the wind in the moors, the ice that capped every stone. “I am more Northman than I am a bastard, a Man of the Night’s Watch or the King of the North,” he had said to her in their first true conversation within the halls of Dragonstone, an age ago now. “And the people of the North-- that’s how they feel as well. It comes before lands and titles and all else. It’s as much geography as it is in their hearts.”

“I did not know you prayed,” she said to him quietly as he opened his eyes, his ritual seemingly completed.

He did not look up at her. She felt as though it had been years since she had last seen his eyes. He took up his scabbard and sword belt beside him, seating his blade. “Aye, I don’t,” he responded gruffly as he stood, refitting his belt about his waist. “But if there was a day to pray, it would be this one.”

Dany found herself walking closer, though she had demanded distance from herself in her preparations for coming here. “Targaryens have never been a godly people.”

“What need have you of gods when you have dragons?” Jon asked mildly. From most, it would have been a condemnation. From him, it was simply a question.

She paused, drinking in the tense line of his body, the troubled creases of his face. “How are you faring, my lord?”

Jon emitted an astonished breath. “Where should I begin, Your Grace?”

“At the beginning.”

Jon gazed at her for a moment, taken aback, the corner of his mouth twitching against a fond smile. She found herself caught by him, like a fish on a hook-- before he turned his eyes away, shifting his weight. “I was raised a Stark-- it’s all I’ve known… I fear I do not know how to be a Targaryen.”
Dany chanced a few steps closer to him, feeling as though she were walking straight into a mean and clever game trap--a snare hidden under the leaves that would catch her up and never be free of her. “I am a Targaryen,” she said simply, as if that was enough. As if that _should_ be enough, though she knew it wasn’t--would never be.

She abruptly turned away from him, creating more space between them. “I was sold to the Great Khal when I came of age,” she began suddenly as she turned her head to the side, unwilling to meet the sudden fire that flared in his eyes at these words. “When I married Drogo, I was only a girl with nothing but a name to cling to. But I came to love the Dothraki, in time. The Dothraki became a family to me--they captured a part of my heart forever.” She reached behind her shoulder, bringing her long, pale plait to lie on her chest. “I have not cut my hair since becoming Khaleesi,” she said as she stroked the braid lovingly. “The Dothraki cut their braid after defeat, so the world may know their shame.”

Jon stepped closer to her, hasty, clumsy, as if pulled on a lead. “And you never shall.”

Dany looked up at him, too close now, too hot, too real. She took a quiet step back, head bowed. “I came to know and love the Dothraki, and they became mine and I became theirs in turn.”

“Aye,” Jon croaked, his throat working, eyes overfull. He seemed to want to say more, but bit the words back like snapping hounds.

“You are of the North, Jon, you were a Stark first and nothing will take that away from you,” she ventured slowly, not fully meeting his eyes. “But you are a Targaryen second, and that counts for something. It counts for _everything_. Just as I embraced the strength of the Dothraki so should you embrace the strength of the dragon.”

Jon shook his head. “You found a place among the Dothraki because you are strong,” he said, words frayed with hopelessness. “The Dothraki admire strength above everything else…you’ve told me so yourself.” He looked down at his boots, shaking his head again. “What do I have that is Targaryen in any way? Where do I possibly go?”

Dany stepped closer to him, careful to ignore the heat of him that dug into her skin like thorns, the scent of him that filled her lungs like smoke. “What Stark could ask a favor of a dragon?” she asked fiercely, jaws clenched and fists flexing. “What Stark would dare touch one?” _Dare love one?_ she came dangerously close to saying, choking the words back like bile. “Tell me, my lord, who among you and your siblings holds the shortest wick on their temper, the thinnest veil over their heart? What Stark would do what you did this morning in the that hall?”
When she looked at him then, she felt her blood stall, her breath catch in her lungs. His eyes were far too close to those she had seen their first night together-- when the world began anew for them both. A world when she had slipped between his arms at night and dreamed sweetly of war councils and battle plans; of who to invite to feasts and how best to make up after an argument. A world made of simpler things-- a world of their making and nothing more.

They stood in a dreadful quiet, their eyes drinking each other in with a feral hunger. She felt herself flailing desperately against it, like kicking back a wave from a storm-tossed ocean.

“What you say is true, my queen,” Jon said slowly, his voice taking on a timber that pooled hot and savage in her belly-- bubbling like molten gold. “Until your wise words, I had only thought of one way I saw the dragon in my blood.” His eyes raked over her body then, shameless, burning a trail as hot as coals over her skin.

She shivered, feeling her blood sing with it. She bit her tongue hard, willing herself from the thick fog of want that draped her now. She had meant to say goodbye -- damn him. She felt some amount of frustration kick up in her veins. It was as though he were purposefully stepping in her path, thwarting her every move, knocking her off-kilter and clumsy. She closed her eyes, blocking the sight of him standing dark and beautiful before her, reforming her thoughts, the words she wanted to say to him floating back to her through the heavy haze of lust.

“Come,” Jon said, voice throaty. She opened her eyes and the words she had wrested from her harried mind dissolved on her tongue like a bitter herb. He held an arm out and she stepped unsurely closer, but did not take his arm-- certain that if she touched him then, she would burn away to a cinder. He led her to the other side of the tree they stood before and she couldn’t help the tiny gasp that escaped her.

A ghastly, yawning face had been carved into the ash-white bark-- eyes and mouth bleeding with red, sticky sap. “What is this?” She asked breathlessly.

“The Children of the Forest carved faces like these on every Weirwood they could find,” Jon explained. “It was once a way for them to See, or so they say,” he said as he came to stand more fully before the face of the great white tree. “I once recited my vows of the Night's Watch before such a tree.”

“It seems a proper place for such a thing,” she returned, willing away any quaver from her voice.

“Aye,” Jon replied, angling his body towards her, eyes hard as flint. “It is said that no one can lie in front of a Heart Tree.”
Dany shook her head in disbelief, something queer needling under her skin in the wake of the gaze he was giving her. “If only there was such a power in this world.”

Jon stepped closer to her and the very heat of him was almost too much for her to bear. “Why have you come?”

Dany barked out a disbelieving breath, gazing at him in shocked derision. “I only wanted to see how you were faring, my lord,” she said, only slightly breathless in the wake of her astonishment. “We have both suffered much in only one night-- you most especially, I suspect.”

Jon nodded slowly, something in his eyes suspicious, unnerving. “Aye,” he answered. “But that is not the only reason.”

Dany pulled her lips over her teeth as she shook her head, searching the moss and leaves under her feet for answers she knew would not reveal themselves. How did he know? She tipped her head back, forcing herself straighter, her face frosted over with a queen’s grace. “I also came to bid you farewell… to wish you good fortune.” She clasped her hands in front of her, to hide their shaking, clenching her teeth together so he may not hear the stutter of her breath. “I bid you farewell in more than one manner, my lord.”

To her great shock, his face remained impassive. His eyes roved over her face, her neck, questing for something she could not hope to understand. “You are the last of our name, Jon,” she continued unsteadily. “And I cannot provide what--” her words were swallowed by the crashing of his mouth onto hers. She found herself stiffening, startled beyond measure, before she grew boneless, melding easily into his eager arms, his hungry palms. Her mouth opened beneath his own, wishing only for the heat of his breath filling her lungs.

Something savage and angry sparked within her and she wrenched her mouth away with a small cry of pain. He looked at her, alarmed… but also strangely knowing, sad. “Please,” she nearly sobbed. “Please…”

“Why?” he protested, though he drew away. He looked at her with strange eyes-- pensive, questioning. “Why push me away?”

She shook her head, stepping away from him, her already flimsy resolve ever crumbling at the foundation stones under the weight of his eyes, the spell of his voice. “We will speak of it when we return,” she gasped, poorly attempting to inject some command in her voice. She could not do this
now, not while he was swallowing her up like a riptide. She had to retreat, to find shelter from the storm of his eyes. She started to make her way back to the castle, feeling foolish, cowardly.

“I wished for you, you know,” he called after her. She halted, turning to him, though she knew she shouldn’t. “In Hardhome, years before we ever met-- It was a fool’s hope. An impossible thing.” He stepped forward, eyes downcast, “And that is what you are, Daenerys… a miracle.”

Inexplicably, she felt herself bristling, shoulders tensing like a cornered panther. “So this it then? You fear to lose your miracle against the darkness to come? Am I no more than a weapon for you to sharpen and use at your will? Well, fear not my lord, no matter what lies between us, I will hold up my end of the bargain.”

He leaned back, eyes narrowed in shocked disdain. “You would think such things of me?”

“I think you to be a man of honor, Jon Snow,” she nearly snarled.

“Yet you intend to cast me aside.”

She stopped short at this, blood halting in her veins. She felt her insides coil like a cobra, her body snapping like a tow rope in the wake of the pulse of anger that rocked through her. *I will have Tyrion’s head on a plate.* “You do not know what I intend, my lord ,” she spat, “but I know that you will do as I command.”

His eyes flitted, casting about for safe purchase before landing within the vicious heat of her own. “You told me we would rule. You told me—”

“This is beyond you or me, Jon. This is beyond anything ,” She drew herself up, chest filling with something black and poisonous. “We shall speak of this when we return.”

“Say it, Daenerys,” Jon blurted, as if the words had simply burst through his chest without his permission. “Say the words. Tell me what it is you want.” He chanced a dangerous step closer and it took everything within her to not walk away and leave him, to not close the gap between them and breathe him in like brimstone-- so she stood, unmoving and locked in a confused torment. “Set me upon the path of misery, or give me reason to hope for everything I’ve ever wanted,” he said in a rush-- as if he had to force the words between the the frantic pace of his heart. “Everything we’ve always wanted, Daenerys— but do not stand there and tell me that this is a conversation for another time.”
Dany dared to raise her eyes to him and the sight of him broke her open like an egg. She tried not to notice the shaking of her limbs, the mad pace of her pulse in her throat. “What is it that you want of me?” she asked, angry tears stinging her eyes, voice too shaky for her liking. “What do you want me to say to you? You are the last of my house… the last of my blood that may continue—”

“I want you,” he cut across her, voice dark and fierce at once like a guttering fire. “You, Daenerys.” She stood mutely before him, a long, wretched breath leaving her. He closed the already small distance between them, crowding her, his eyes as deep and black as a night-lit sea. “I used to wonder why I was brought back… why I should be granted a second chance when so many other good men’s blood spilled into the earth and nothing more.” She suppressed a shiver as she felt his calloused fingers brush her neck, comb her hair behind her ear. “I used to think that my life was simply not my own— that it belonged to the Night King— stolen from him before he could take it as his own.”

He pressed his brow to hers, their breath mingling like steam and sun after a spring rain. “I never thought I would survive this war— but—” He halted, taking in a rasping breath. “I think now— now I know why whatever god or demon may have brought me back.”

Daenerys had always prided herself in her strength. She had endured countless violations— physical and emotional alike… and she had cast them into the flames of her heart, turning and tempering them into freshly forged armor to gird herself against the traps that would surely be laid in her path.

But all her fortifications, her carefully constructed defenses, crumbled like a sandcastle lost to the encroaching tide. Tears splintered her vision as she shook her head furiously, a sob escaping the wrestling of her throat. “Damn you, Jon Snow,” she gasped as she fisted a hand into the fur of his cloak.

His mouth was so very close to her own, his haggard breaths leaving humid trails upon the skin of her chin, her neck. “Our blood may end with us, Daenerys, but the world we will make together will not.” His words spread heated and heavy on her collarbone, imbuing them both the great promise held within them like a ancient and forgotten rune. “What is your command, my queen?” He asked, his voice simply wrecked, barely above the breath of the wind.

She closed her eyes, taking in the scent of him— petrichor and sweet-rot— earth and woodsmoke and snowmelt. She thought, idly, that she would never get enough of the spell that sparked through her blood as it filled her lungs. The tilt of her head was as inevitable as a sunset as she caught his lips in her own.

The heat of his hands through her dress was scalding, but not nearly enough— the distance simply
intolerable. She was freezing to death and she was sure the only thing that would save her was the
drag of his callouses along the ridge of her hip, the edges of his teeth on the cap of her shoulder,
the heat of his tongue on her neck.

She fed him a moan, wanton and loud and uncaring and he responded just as she wished— pulling
her by the hips, turning her and pushing until she felt her back meet the cold bark of the tree. She
fumbled with his lacings, wasting no time, the hard line of him through the leather making her tip
her head back in a bout of dizzy need that left her boneless. He shoved a hand ungracefully under
her skirts, finding the top of her trousers and yanking, hard and fast, tearing the fabric as easily as a
sheaf of parchment. She felt a shameless rush of heat to her core as she heard the sound of it,
relishing in his power, his uncontrolled need to take her overcoming all sense.

He grunted as she freed him from his leathers, the heat of him like the fire from a forge, hard as a
root. She licked her lips, overcome, bending her head to capture his astonished breath within her
throat, languishing in the sweet burn of his rough hands as he spread her wide. She gasped as he
filled his palms with the flesh of her ass, lifting her up, sinking himself within her with one motion.

Her teeth clamped down on the flesh of his neck, poorly muffling the ragged groan that escaped
her as he drew himself out, sliding home again with a filthy ‘slap’.

So swift their arousal, so protracted their time from each other, Dany found her back arching like a
bow within a mere moment. The knots of the tree bit deliciously into her shoulders as he pounded
into her. Her mouth fell open in a soundless yell as she shook apart around him, the power of her
release blinding her. Her breath dragged from her throat in an endless, ragged gasp and then Jon
was crying out into her neck, spilling inside her with a savage twitch of his hips.

They remained like that, folded among each other, until a horn blasted-- lonesome and dreary from
a distant parapet, signalling the dread purpose that had been laid before their feet.

Carefully, Jon lowered her to the ground, their blood still swirling, breaths still ringing. He laid his
brow upon her own. “Four days,” he breathed.

She nodded, biting her lip, kissing him savagely. “Four days.”

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He thought that the world’s heart beat at some terrible cost and that the world’s pain and its beauty moved in a relationship of diverging equity and that in this headlong deficit the blood of multitudes might ultimately be exacted for the vision of a single flower.

Cormac McCarthy, All the Pretty Horses

Chapter End Notes

Wooooowoowowow, you guys. This chapter took a lot out of me. I hope you like it as much as I do. Sorry that it’s 36 pages?

I know there was a lot to absorb in this chapter-- and it was all kind of... unconventionally presented, but I hope it makes sense and turns out alright. Also, we get a visit from Dark Jon this chapter. I really enjoyed tapping into that side of him, but I'm anxious about it.

Also, this is my second time writing smut, so please be gentle.

GOOD NEWS-- this chapter took so long because I was busy writing chapter ten. \_\_\(ツ\)_/\n
I included a quote in this chapter, which I know may be jarring, since I have not done that yet in this story... but this quote is really what inspired this chapter, so I thought it deserved proper tribute.

You all are beautiful angels and are truly what drives me on in this crazy quest. Thanks again to the perfect hardlyfatal for the once over and for dealing with my dogged neuroticism.

PS: fuck the Northern lords.
The Hunt

Chapter Summary

What lay before her now was to be no war. Her failure meant more than the simplicity of death or the rote torment of defeat. Every scant drop of goodness remaining within this battered and beautiful world hung on a string before her and one slip could see that string severed forever.

Chapter Notes

Just a warning: tense change ahead. We're shifting to present. Sorry if that's not really your cup of tea.¯\_(ツ)_/¯

Also... VIOLENCE.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The silence is a solid thing.

It presses on her, fills her lungs, seeps into her veins. It circles overhead like a pack of vultures, pooling in her belly like curdled milk.

She walks slowly through the blackened bones of what was once Mole’s Town. She reaches a hand out, rubbing her fingers on a spire of charred wood. It feels oddly silken. Her skin comes away dark, the color of old blood. She smears it into the hollows of her eyes.

“Find some burned wood, Your Grace,” Tormund had told her among the jostle of the yard as he and the others had prepared to leave, four days ago. “Paint your eyes with it... it will help with the snowblindness.”

She looks at herself in the dim, broken reflection of a frozen puddle trapped within a rutted cart trail. She appears naught but a ghoul-- come to haunt the ruins of a town perched at the edge of the world.

The skeleton of the town had been routed out by the Unsullied and the rest of Jon’s forces not a day before-- driving away any squatters, brigands or refugees so Daenerys might reside in the emptiness in safety with only her sons to comfort her.
And Ghost.

The wolf had bounded up to her when she landed, dauntless in the face of her fearsome children. Jon was in need of every last man, but would not leave her wholly unguarded within the desolation of Mole’s Town. She felt the gift as good as if he had pressed a kiss to her brow.

She did not know what she had done to deserve such a man.

“Your fates were hung with the stars long ago.”

She turns to Drogon, asleep among the ashes of his nest, stroking his great snout. It had been a long and exhausting flight. She feels it too, in her bones, but she could not rest as easy as her son.

She kneels next to him, checking the crude leather straps that affixed the even cruder blades to her son’s claws. There had been little time to refine such work and as accomplished of a smith that Gendry was-- mastering a lost art of such lofty metallurgy was as difficult of a task for even the most adept practitioner. Nevertheless, the blades rested atop Drogon’s talons, the metal a dark and malevolent gray streaked with ripples the color of quicksilver. She reaches down, brushing a soft thumb over the edge, hissing as the skin splits under even the faintest pressure.

She stands, sucking the bleeding pad of her thumb. It had been a stupid, impulsive thing to do, she knew-- but she had to ensure that her children had been properly armed. That the blades were sufficiently lethal.

She pulls up her cloak about her shoulders, wincing at the dull pain that shot up her backside, a not so distant reminder of her last few lonely days in Winterfell. Her training with Arya had commenced almost as soon as Jon had left. Despite her determination to join her brother, Arya had been left behind and it seemed that she was determined to take her frustration out on Dany.

The girl had offered her a new and fresh blade-- as beautiful as the new-risen sun, as delicate as a butterfly's wing. Dany had gasped, marvelling at the snarling faces of the entwined dragon’s heads-- two at the crossguard and one topping the pommel. No jewels or fine, precious metals adorned it, but it had proven to be one of the most beautiful creations Dany had ever laid eyes upon. Arya had not held back with her, sending her reeling onto her ass in the frosty mud countless. She came to understand why Arya may have waited for the departure of her brother and her guard to begin such training.
It had been a thorough practice in humility, coming so very close to the razor-edge of her own mortality. Fully understanding how helpless she really was without the fire and flight of Drogon beneath her.

Dany had welcomed the distraction, had thrown herself into her training with an almost maniacal fervor. Each night she returned to her chamber and each night Missandei and Gilly would quietly *tsk* at her yellowed bruises, the blisters that had opened on her palms. Dany hadn’t minded. She was a dragon, and dragons needed to learn how to kill.

She had left the sword in Winterfell, knowing full well that she could not yet wield it properly and not wanting any harm to befall it.

Dany looks to the northern horizon again, fruitlessly, her mind and body locked in a heady spell of battle nerves and desperate worry. Her head swims and she reaches out a hand, bracing herself on Drogon’s flank, her stomach turning like a wheel.

Every morning since Jon’s departure had seen her bent over her chamber pot, retching whatever small contents her belly held. Missandei had fretted, asking her what she had ate the previous evening. Gilly had cast her sidelong, knowing looks that made Dany’s skin crawl with the implication.

Her body rebelled against the dire circumstance she now found herself in. Nothing more.

She had seen war before to be sure, had waged her own battles and had slain multitudes-- but what laid before her now was violence of a different nature. War was plain, war came easily to men-- a primal vocation.

What laid before her now was to be no war. Her failure meant more than the simplicity of death or the rote torment of defeat. Every scant drop of goodness remaining within this battered and beautiful world hung on a string before her and one slip could see that string severed forever.

Their plan was simultaneously brilliant and all too fragile-- a spider’s web on a gallows. Torch Castle Black too soon and their farce would be revealed. Too late, and she would be battling over a field of corpses.

She gathers in a great breath, steam blooming before her. She clambers up her sleeping child,
curling her legs in front of her as she seats herself on his back. Drogon emits a sleepy groan but otherwise does not stir. Her eyes gaze northward, unblinking, drinking in the monochrome sweep of hills and bare-boned trees—the swirl of snow and the white mist of a distant storm. Nothing stirs. No rustle of mice, no yapping of dogs. She wonders if this is what oblivion feels like—if the world had ended already, if they were too late. She wonders if she would ever truly know if she were the last living creature on the earth.

She shifts, desperate for distraction—reaching into her belt, drawing out the length of silk that Jon had gifted her all too easily within the yard of Winterfell as he sat easily in his saddle, his eyes black and depthless as he looked down at her.

She had known that she had trod too close, that there was no proper reason she should see the King in the North off in such intimate climes, surrounded by so many curious eyes. But she had found that she could not much care—especially as he had leaned forward just slightly, offering her his hand, taking up her own, pressing quick and clumsy lips to her gloved knuckles. A strange hush had fallen over the general bustle of the yard then—and she had wanted nothing more than to lunge forward and capture his mouth in her own. Thankfully, the spill of fabric suddenly filling her palm as he pulled away had sufficiently distracted her.

She closes her eyes as she recalls that day—their heated words and heated mouths, the bark of an ancient tree digging into her shoulders, the desperate thirst for whatever dark power teemed within his lungs. Watching him leave her that day, so soon after they had melded back into each other—it was a task she would never wish upon another living soul.

She looks down at her open palm again, her eyes tracing over the fine needlework of the dragon and the wolf, entwined together like a fearsome chimera. She had recognized Sansa’s exquisite work as easily as if she had left a maker’s mark—and it only made the gift all the more precious.

She slams her eyes shut again, tears scalding. He had given it to her as easy as passing her a torch. The promise curled within it like a scroll feels heavy as lead in her palm. *I’ll come back to you.*

It was a foolish thing for Jon Snow to swear and Jon Snow always kept his word.

She opens her eyes, breathing out, feeling her lungs burn with it. She slides down her son’s thorny hide and into the slurry of ash and mud and new snow. It was almost a childish move, a girl rolling down a new and green slope. She paces to a drift piled in a corner like a dune. She bends toward it, scraping away a furrow with bare hands, fingers red and stinging. She lays the ribbon within the ice as careful as a babe. She could not bring it with her, where she was going.
Promises did not abide in war.

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They come to a halt once the hulking dark of Castle Black rears from the featureless snow.

The world lays still and silent before them. The road paved over in a flawless white sheath that made it as though no other living soul had ever trod into such country. The sky was dammingly clear, the moon a milky half-shell that cast the ice into a shimmering silver.

The journey had been long, fraught. Storm and wind had harried them at every hard-won league. They had stopped for rest only in fits and spells-- men napping on sprawled cloaks or else slumped in their saddles. Every last one of them bore dark hollows around their eyes like brands.

They had met Edd, Beric and the beleaguered Night’s Watch of Castle Black two days previously upon the King’s Road. Jon had entreated that they stay upon their path to Winterfell, but Beric and Edd had protested so bitterly that Jon could not help but welcome them into their fold-- a hundred more good men and fifty horses to add to his small force.

Sam pulls his horse clumsily to a stop next to him, looking upon the dark mass of Castle Black pensively. “What now?”

Jon looks over at him, a small grimace lining his mouth. He had not thought overly much of what to do once they got to their destination-- he had been half expecting the plan to go to shit the moment they left Winterfell’s gates.

Jon glances over his shoulder as Jorah slows his horse up alongside them, looking as stern and determined as Jon had ever seen him.

“If it please Your Grace,” Jorah begins, the change of title the man chose not lost upon Jon, “I could take half the horses to the west. We can hide easily, charging upon your signal.”

Jon nods, looking back to the empty shell of the castle smeared on the horizon.
“That would be most advantageous, my friend, thank you.” Jorah inclines his head and Jon tilts his chin in return. “Take one hundred riders-- volunteers, my lord-- and ride ahead. Rest up if you can- you’ll need it.” He indicates Davos with an outstretched arm as the man pulls level with the little group that had coalesced at the head of the company. “Davos will go with you, seeing as though you will be commanding Northmen.”

Davos shakes his head furiously. “You are my King, Snow,” Davos all but growls. “I’ve left you once, I won’t do it again. I may be a shit fighter-- but you’ll have to cleave off my head before you will be rid of me again.”

Jon couldn’t help but smile, feeling warmth and frustration in equal measure. “Very well,” he replies in breathless defeat as he turns to Jorah again. “Take Edd. If he can’t bring the Northerners to heel, no one will.”

Jorah bows shallowly in his saddle, turning his horse to ride away towards the rear of the company where the mounted men had gathered.

“The Unsullied are with you, King in North,” Grey Worm indicates as he pulls cruelly and clumsily at his horse's reins. The man was proficient in many things-- but riding was not one of them. “We will stand with you at front line.”

Jon shakes his head. “You are the queen’s most important commander, Grey Worm, I will not have you and your men so exposed. You will stay behind the gates until necessity draws you out.”

Grey Worm’s brow wrinkles in disappointment. “The Unsullied will not cower behind wall, Jon Snow.”

“You will not be cowering, my friend, you will be waiting. You and your men could very well save us all.” He shrugs. “Besides, half of your forces will be standing front and center… but I will not allow you to among that number.”

The man nods reluctantly after a long moment, looking anything but pleased at this plan. Tormund and The Hound ride up at that moment, mouths grim and shoulders high.

“How many archers do we have?” Jon asks Tormund without preamble. The wildling had gathered the last of his people for the mission-- all of them superb marksmen.
“‘Round fifty,” Tormund responds gruffly.

“Good,” Jon says, looking to the horizon and nodding. “You and those archers will station at the outer wall.”

Much like Grey Worm, Tormund looks very much put-out, but remains silent.

Brienne rides up next, looking sullen and serious as ever with Beric and Podrick at her side. Jon looks back at her, nodding in approval. “You and the Hound and the remaining riders will stay with me. One hundred Unsullied will front us with shield and spear as Tormund and his men rain down upon any Dead with arrows.” His eyes track slowly over all those gathered around him as something dark and powerful fills his chest. “If the line breaks, I will send Beric to Jorah and the reserves of Unsullied behind the gates will make their way through.” He turns his gaze back to Tormund. “No matter what happens, you stay with the archers and bloody well rain hell down on them.”

Tormund puffs out his chest, knocking a fist on his shoulder. Jon turns his fierce eyes to Sam, who quails, just a bit.

“You wait here with four Brothers of your choosing. Set up a camp as best you can. There is a trapper’s shack not a half league off the road in that wood there,” he indicates with a nod of his head. “Set up an infirmary as best you can.”

Plans drawn and duties assigned, a dark weight of determination and dread purpose falls upon them like a fog. Jon flicks his reins.

“Let’s go.”

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She watches the smoke rise into the sky-- inky black, curling like a fern.

She turns to Ghost, tense as a tripwire at her side as he gazes at the sooty cloud on the horizon.
“Go,” she commands and he does-- taking off like a freshly plucked arrow.

She pivots on her heel, facing her children as they shift and sigh within the ashes of their meager home.

“Are you ready, my sons?” she asks them in Valyrian. “What we hunt this day are no wooden ships or horse carts. Today we slay a demon. Today we free your brother from slavery.”

Drogon and Rhaegal both cry out, a dangerous hunger in their voices. She unclips her heavy cloak, laying it carefully in the snow. Drogon drops his shoulder and she climbs up, seating herself, leaning forward, her blood churning like boiling pitch.

“Fly.”

+++ 

They torch the keep after it’s too late.

The Night King had brought cloud and storm in his wake-- hiding behind icy winds and whipping snow. Jon had hesitated to their peril-- not wanting to waste everything because of a simple winter storm.

Daenerys battling over a graveyard was a better choice than no battle at all, he had decided-- if it meant she could destroy the monster the Night King sat upon.

Jon rides to the front of the line, kicking his flighty horse through its mounting panic as he watches the encroaching storm marching in from the east. The flames of the main keep lick hot and hungry at his shoulders as he trots his horse to and fro before the stolid line of Unsullied at his back. He looks on as the fog draws nearer, listening as the shuffling and crunching of many feet upon the snow floats towards them like a dream.

“Hold!” Jon shouts as the awful sounds of snarling and grunting start to filter through the howling of the wind. The smell of spoiled flesh tangs sweet and acrid in his nostrils. He feels the men behind him twitch, as if a part of one body. “Hold!”
The noises grow ever louder, thickening the air. The wind wends around them in a frenzy, snow blowing up in clouds of white that swirl and bank like spirits. He catches the first sight of that gleaming, evil blue through the smoke of the false storm like a phosphene.

“Now!”

The clang of spears upon shields is met almost instantly with the thud of rotted flesh and brittle bone-- the screech of the dead laid to rest forever.

+++ 

They sail over the sheet of clouds, tumbling gray stretching endlessly like a forgotten sea.

Her eyes stream, her teeth chattering within her mouth with a coldness she could scarcely comprehend. She clutches numb fingers to Drogon’s spikes.

She looks to the swath of the sullen gray carpet beneath her, not truly knowing what it was she seeks.

She blinks as a bloom of icy blue pulses beneath her after what is no more than an hour-- seeming an eternity. She hesitates with a held breath, not knowing what to make of it. Dragons did not breathe in such a hue.

She leans forward, suddenly certain as a second bout of chilly blue bruises the cloud. “Dive,” she murmurs to her son, dangerously quiet.

With a mighty flap of his wings, Drogon pitches forward, Rhaegal following right at his back. They pierce through frigid clouds like a thunderbolt, the wind slicing into her lungs, ripping tears from her eyes.

The land below is sparked and marred with fire and smoke, but all she see is her lost son-- Viserion, pouring strange, blue flame upon the earth-- pale as ash, eyes cold and lifeless, glowing with demon’s blood.
Drogon kicks out his legs, readying for a strike. His claws glance off Viserion’s wing, the creature too quick-- dipping his shoulder to dive out of the way within a mere instant.

Rhaegal dives like a falcon beside them as Drogon screeches in frustration. Dany watches as her other son opens his wings wide, pulling himself to a halt, drawing his legs forward so that his back is pulled parallel to the ground. Rhaegal kicks out desperately, reaching out to get his claws around Viserion’s neck.

Dany can almost hear the dull scrape of metal on hide before Viserion drops a wing, his body falling to the right and out of Rhaegal’s grasp in one motion. Dany realizes that whatever her child had become-- it was no dragon. Viserion was a hellion sent from a darkness she could not begin to reconcile. A beast beyond any reckoning.

She watches in horror as Viserion tips himself upright, legs kicking out to his former brother. He roars, sending a stream of cold blue flame right into Rhaegal’s chest.

Dragon fire could not kill a dragon-- but whatever strange magic possessed her former son now…

Rhaegal wails, tossing his great head back as steam rises from his scales like a geyser. He pushes his legs back, lunging towards the clouds-- the only safety he could find from whatever curse hounded him now.

Dany feels rather than hears Drogon’s mighty roar of anguish. “No,” she shouts. “To Rhaegal, to your brother!”

But Drogon could not be dissuaded. Dany could feel the heat of him swell under her-- the temperature near scalding between her ankles, her thighs, as his rage built up within him like a stoked forge. Drogon dives again and Dany is left clutching at the spikes before her, feeling her center lift up and away from her seat with the motion.

Drogon frees a jet of flame from his jaws and upon Viserion’s back, the dragon still distracted with spewing whatever strange spell fire after Rhaegal’s retreating form. Drogon misses, his fury blinding him as he pursues his lost brother in unstoppable bloodlust.

That’s when Dany sees him-- skin the color of ice that had never once known sun, eyes lit with a power as fundamental as the moon, as cold and distant as nebula.
He is so… vulnerable … sitting alone and unguarded atop his hellhound beast. He looks right at her, gaze knifing straight into her marrow. She feels the blood rear up in her veins and her ears ring with a humid slam of adrenaline. She licks her lips.

“Kill.”

Drogon kicks up his claws, descending, readying himself to simply snatch the devil from his wretched steed like a tick. It would be so easy-- the Great War over before it really began.

Drogon looses another mighty breath of fire, crowning the Night King’s shoulders like the mantle of a cloak.

Drogon’s flames turn to shards of ice as sharp as razors-- singing through the air like angry hornets, slicing through her dress, stinging into her cheeks, her knuckles, her brow. Steam plumes up like a thunderhead, scalding hot and smelling oddly of melted metal, acidic and earthly all at once.

Drogon yelps, shaking his head violently as he pulls away in sudden panic. Dany holds on desperately, the flesh of her hands tearing open upon the ridges of her son’s spikes.

“Up,” she gasps.

Drogon lunges upwards with a mighty thrust of his wings that catches under her legs, leaving her feet dangling and loose in the air. She cries out in pain and fear-- the sharp ascent pulling her shoulders, blood slicking her hands, grip slipping.

Dany chances a look over her shoulder as she hears Viserion give a yell that nearly freezes her blood. Her lost son is gaining on them too swiftly-- not a creature born of this world, not held to its same laws. The pale creature below her was made from a different material, something infernal and ancient and she feels her breath leave her at this terrible revelation.

She throws herself forward with a mighty scream, finding her legs again, her blood igniting like the blackest pitch. Determination steels her marrow, girds her heart against whatever fear threatens to flood in and swamp her good as a rip tide.
“Faster, my son!” she shouts and Drogon answers in kind, the flap of his wings nearly bucking her off and over his head.

He bursts through the clouds in a swirl of molten fire and hissing mist, Viserion tearing up right behind with a lusty yell.

Dany blinks against the sudden light, the moon gleaming, a rare jewel against a black sky. Rhaegal wades in the air right above her before diving, the wind and heat of him passing over the crown of her head by a mere palm’s-breadth.

Rhaegal kicks his legs out with an enraged scream, falling upon the pale form of his former brother with a resounding ‘smack’ that sounds like a roll of thunder. Rhaegal closes his bladed talons into Viserion’s tail, opening his wings to pull them both to a halt. Viserion falls back, his interrupted momentum snapping him as good as a bowstring, spine and head swirling like a whip. Dany watches as the Night King falls, engulfed by cloud.

She swallows back her command to follow-- knowing that her son is what they had come to destroy.

Drogon reels back, preparing for a daring dive. “No,” she pleads. “Not yet, my sweet.”

But Drogon is rendered deaf to her voice and her control, overcome by bloodlust. He lunges forward and Dany feels her teeth rattle with the shock of it, finding her grip on his spikes just a moment too late.

Rhaegal cries out, pleading, as Viserion rights himself, bringing himself level in order to deliver another glut of scalding blue flame.

Drogon crashes into him with a mighty ‘thud’, his bladed claws closing in around his brother’s neck with a sound that reminds her of the snapping of timber in a storm. The impact jars her to the roots of her hair-- dislodging her from her seat as easy as a plucked dandelion. She yelps, clinging to the side of her son’s neck, fingernails clawing and bloody at stony hide as she desperately tries to right herself.

Momentum carries them to a bitter fate. Drogon pitches back, hanging upside down from Viserion’s neck like a strange and mighty bat, claws slicing through rotted flesh. Dany’s lungs fill with a rank smell-- metallic and sweet and putrid all at once. Black, inky blood spills out the gashes
of Viserion’s neck as he wails like a stuck sow. The wounds boil and froth like lava, steam rising in gluts of hissing white cloud. She shouts in agony as a droplet falls upon her shoulder, boiling into her flesh like lighted lye.

Viserion gapes, drawing his head back for one last, desperate blow. Drogon is ready, sending a blast of flame straight into his open mouth as they scream towards the earth like a comet.

Dany loses all sense then-- hearing only a piercing cry as her bloody palms slip from her son’s hide. Her hands dangle uselessly-- numb and wet and grasping at empty air. She seems to float for an instant, watching as Drogon’s red flame glitters through the pale flesh of his brother, flesh burning and coming apart like sailcloth.

A hideous crack echoes through the sky. With a plume of steam and flame, Viserion’s head is plucked from his neck like nothing more than a tiresome thorn.

She feels a great and infernal heat embrace her… the licking of flames like the rushing of a swift river around her as her clothes burn away with all her fear. She tips her head back, waiting for release.

+++ 

A ragged roar pierces through the howling of the wind, sending a jolt of bone-deep dread down his spine.

“Fucking hell,” the Hound whispers beside him as both men turn their gaze upwards.

It comes tearing through the fog like a hellion, a dragon pale as milk with eyes like dying stars and a visage of evil borne upon its back.

“Pull back!” Jon bellows, his horse rearing up in fright. His command proves too late and the front ranks keeping the dead at bay vaporise under a stream of blue flame. Acrid, metallic steam curls in his nostrils in the wake of it. “To me! To me!” he cries as he wheels his horse around, fleeing like a fool.

The dragon arcs upwards, preparing to come around for another sweep. Men jostle about him as he kicks his horse, his companions rushing towards the flaming ruins of Castle Black.
“Archers!” he screams as he pulls his horse to a halt before the walls, the only things not torched. His eyes stream with smoke, pearly ghosts of blue flame burning on his retinas. “Knock! Draw! Loose!”

Arrows rain down upon the dead that had chased after them like hounds on scent, knocking them back. The relief proves a fragile thing as the screech of Viserion rings in his ears.

Desperation catches him up in a thick, sucking mud of panic. He watches a trail of strange, pale flame slice through one of the walls at his back like butter. The wood explodes into lethal, flying splinters, sending men falling like leaves, screaming in agony.

“Beric!” Jon yells, and the man shoots from their company in answer like an arrow, heading west with his flaming sword waving over his head.

The demon circles back around as The Unsullied teem and shift at the gates, battle ready and yet unsure of what to do. One intrepid soul tosses his spear as the beast makes another pass. The throw is true but the weapon glances off Viserion’s hide as if not more than a fly.

“Tormund! Fall back! Fall back!” Jon screams as he sees the demon dip and dive like a bee, coming back for another fatal blow.

Tormund shouts the order to retreat and he and his men flood down the stairs of the wall just an instant too late. The wall bursts into a cloud of splinters, bodies, and flame.

The world narrows to nothing more than a pin light-- smoke fills his lungs, noxious and sweet with burning flesh. Ash clings to his hair, falling onto his lips where his tongue darts out, morbid and curious... dry and void of anything-- like tasting death itself. Screams and shouts are muted, the color sapped and frayed.

“Your Grace!” Brienne is shouting at him, has presumably been shouting at him for an age. “Your Grace! What is your command?”

Her voice sinks in slow and steady like sand through a chink of armor. He looks around, his men hacking at dead things while still others scream in pain, writhing in new, steaming mud. He casts his eyes upward-- eyes flitting about the gray roof of cloud, but no answer to his troubles comes. He hangs his head, looking to his gloved hands wrapped around his reins. He idly thinks of a scrap
of stone in a frozen lake at the edge of the world, ages ago now.

The thundering of many hooves meets his ears and he lifts his head. Jorah and Beric come screaming in from the west, not but a hundred foolhardy men galloping behind them.

He feels his nerves steel, his blood simmering in his veins, rushing into his ears. He kicks his horse forward with a feral shout, mind made up. If he was to be bait for this trap, he may as well act like it.

He hears Brienne’s strangled yell from behind him as she lunges to follow. “Stay!” he screams over his shoulder, but she does not.

He curses under his breath, digging his heels cruelly into his horse’s sides. The beast screams, eyes rolling, spittle flying, hooves slicing through mud and snow alike in a wild flight.

He hears the desolate cry of Viserion at his back, furious that his quarry should flee like a coward.

A fresh line of dead closes in upon him and he lowers his sword, swinging in a deadly arc. Rotting flesh is met with cold steel, and three fall under his blade in one blow.

One of them wields a spear and drives it into his horse’s chest. Jon flies forward, catapulting out of his saddle and drawing a trough into the slush of mud and frost with his body. He shouts in pain as he rights himself, his shoulder smarting.

A wight staggers forward, jawless and gaping and flings itself onto him, digging skinless fingers into his throat. Jon gasps, not knowing where his sword had fallen, bringing his empty hands up to the creature’s skull, squeezing in desperation.

The wight falls away with a piteous screech, as pearly fangs burst through its rotted jugular. Jon falls away, breaths ragged and large as his palm rubs at his tender throat. Ghost gallops away with a snarl, falling upon another victim with tooth and claw.

“Oy!” someone shouts and he catches the glint of metal flying through the air. He lifts a hand and catches it, the familiar weight of Longclaw within his palm filling him with a fresh and boiling courage.
The snow and wind are relentless, and a gash somewhere above his brow leaks hot blood into his eyes. He sees Jorah and Beric and the Hound and all the rest fighting bitterly through the storm of ice and dead, foes falling around them like swatted locusts.

He raises his sword, eyes hazing, head swimming in an unquenchable thirst-- ready to paint the earth red-- to clench the heat of death between his teeth like raw flesh.

He presses forward, bringing his blade down in a fearsome arc, slicing straight through a wight like a heel of bread. Another comes careening from the fog of the false storm with a rusted axe brandished above its head and Jon brings his sword to the right with a deft twirl— steel bites into sun-bleached pelvis with a hideous ‘crunch’.

A phosphorescent ball of flame explodes only feet from him and he is thrown to the ground as limbs of living and dead alike fall from the sky like a macabre rain. He spits coppery mud from his mouth, wiping his eyes and looking upward.

Viserion hovers, a hulking, pale vulture-- his eyes trained straight into his soul-- glowing with a maniacal hunger, teeth bared in an harrowing grin like a jackal finding his prey.

Two mighty voices ring through the air, a thunderclap made flesh— Drogon and Rhaegal burst through the clouds above Viserion.

His heart nearly flies through his ribs, seeing the two beasts chase after the demon with flame and steel and snapping teeth. His desperate eyes drink in her pale form, a streak of white upon Drogon’s black scales.

“With me!” A voice sounds from his right, fingers closing in around his elbow.

He blinks his eyes rapidly, snapping his head to the side and catching sight of Brienne, dragging him away with gritted teeth. He shouts in warning, pushing her away roughly as a knot of wights fall upon them. Longclaw sings as it clashes with the haft of an axe. With a mighty grunt he shoves the creature back, bucking two more behind his would-be attacker into the mud. He spins, driving his sword up and out, catching two wights on his blade in one thrust.

Wind howls in his ears as loud as his blood. Brienne, The Hound, Jorah, Beric and Grey Worm all slash and hack and parry around him, and it is then he realizes they have coalesced around him like
oil on water, forming a protective barrier.

He doesn’t have the time to feel much of anything at this revelation, as all gathered snap their heads back at the sound of a ‘crack’, as ruinous and loud as thunder.

Jon feels his blood—churning like an angry surf with violence—simply evaporate from his veins. Viserion cries out in one final plea before a pulse of flame and heat snaps his head from his neck, a grape plucked from the vine.

But Jon’s eyes can barely drink it in, pulled like a lodestone by the tiny, dark form plummeting through the sky as good as a stone.

“TO YOUR QUEEN!” Jon bellows as he runs, jumping upon the first horse he comes across—kicking and braying like a demon in the heat of the chaos. “TO YOUR QUEEN!”

He digs his heels savagely into the sides of his borrowed steed. It screams in response, tossing its head and taking off after bucking hard under his thighs.

Jon watches helplessly as she spins in the air, trying not to think about how he would surely be too late before she came crashing to the earth—

A glut of fearsome red flame flows from Viserion’s ruined neck, rolling over her helpless form like a wave. An alien and beastly roar crashes through his chest, and he kicks his horse under him again.

Impossibly, Jon watches as her body falls through the inferno—skin steaming and glowing in the strange, blue light of the weak and milky moon. Distantly, he hears the mournful howl of some ancient forest creature.

A terrible screech pierces through the buzzing of his ears, slicing up his spine. Drogon dives in pursuit of his mother like a falling star, wings tucked into his body so that he is nothing but a missile.

The dragon twists, his body falling, throwing himself parallel to the earth. He kicks his claws out, opening his wings wide.
Drogon comes crashing to the earth in a tumble of smoke and snow, rolling onto his great head, folding his wings around himself. Rhaegal calls out in despair above him, coming to land beside his brother.

His horse screams wildly, skidding to a sudden stop, sending him reeling over the horse's neck and crashing into the icy earth. He scrambles back upright, spitting and gasping. His breath had been knocked cleanly from him, his shoulder lancing cruelly with pain.

He staggers to his feet, cradling what he has no doubt is a dislocated shoulder. He stumbles forward, desperation soaking every nerve, breath barely gaining purchase in his lungs.

“Daenerys!” he calls breathlessly through the fog of smoke and falling ash. Drogon whines in pain as if in answer, rolling gingerly to his side as Jon draws closer. Carefully, the dragon unfurls its claws, dropping the limp form of the queen onto the cold and muddy ground.

“Daenerys,” Jon nearly sobs, lunging the last few steps, his head swimming, vision reeling. He falls clumsily to his knees next to her. “Daenerys, please--” he gasps through ruined lungs. He reaches forward, gathering her numbly into his one good arm. “Please…” Ghost is suddenly beside him, fur mottled with mud and streaked with red, whining and pacing.

Her clothes have burned away and she lays icy and pale and lifeless on his lap. Blood seeps from wounds small and innumerable all over her body, her hands soaking with it. Her face is strange and almost unrecognizable, painted thickly with black and red.

An angry red gash from Drogon’s bladed claw runs from the bottom of her hip bone to the top of her knee along the outside line of her thigh. He presses a desperate, shaking palm to the wound, feeling warmth flowing through the space between his fingers like a precious spring. He lets out a wordless shout of panic, wet fingers scrabbling at his sword belt, undoing it much too slowly with only one good arm, his motions made clumsy in his haste.

He wraps the belt around her bare thigh, cinching between palm and teeth tightly at the top of the wound, her skin pinching and pink under his blinding fear. A hand closes on his shoulder and he snarls, bringing a fist up to strike.

His eyes meet Jorah’s own, slanted and dark with worry as the older man lifts him up and away from Daenerys’ body.
A strange, black thing seizes him then, falling in around him like a noxious fume. He reels back and knocks his head into the man’s jaw with a quick and savage pull that sends Jorah careening into the mud.

“Your Grace!”

A familiar voice is shouting from his left. He swings toward it, fist raised and ready when a mighty slap stings across his cheek and he stumbles back. He blinks, the heavy fog of violence breaking like water against a stone. Davos is standing before him, eyes wild and worried, chest heaving, as Brienne wraps her cloak around Dany’s limp form in the mud. Brienne was the only one who still had her original horse, so was the only one who had a cloak stashed away.

Jon’s shoulders fall, his limbs growing as heavy and lifeless as timber. His knees buckle and he stumbles to the mud, chest heaving. Davos kneels before him, smacking a bracing hand on his shoulder, looking him in the eyes.

“She lives, Your Grace, she lives,” the man tells him through gritted teeth.

Jon looks at him dumbly, hardly believing what the man was saying.

“She lives,” Davos says again, quiet and reassuring. Jon feels something within him break, a terrible and acidic weight bursting through his lungs and ending in a strangled sob. “Now pull yourself together, eh? She needs you. Help us get her to Samwell.”

Jon nods, feeling strangely outside of himself, shame soaking into his bones as he staggers to his feet and back to his horse.

+++
This chapter was such a challenge for me folks... and I really do apologize for the wait on this. I know y'all were anticipating this sooner, but I curse myself when I tell my readers that they can expect a quick update it seems.

I went back and forth between past and present tense about \textit{six times} on this chapter. Most everyone I consulted (including Ashleyfanfic and various other friends/fellow authors) advised me against present tense. Well, I heeded and then un-heeded y'all's advice. I do appreciate the advice... I just couldn't do it.

Shorter chapter, but I hope it's still worth it. Y'all mean the world to me. <3

As always, thanks to the precious bean that is \texttt{hardlyfatal} for teaching me about simile abuse.

Come say hi on tumblr. \texttt{@freshhexes}
Chapter Summary

Her hands warmed and she lifted them before her-- gleaming red stained her fingers, the hue almost blinding. What she had assumed to be falling snow landed upon her wet fingers, melting and curling like old parchment. She realized that it was ash-- pouring around her in a soundless blizzard.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The ship rolled about like a loose marble, crashing from wave to wave. Theon braced himself on a beam belowdecks, clutching his stomach, feet wide apart on the planks as he focused on a nail that had risen up from the wood. If he was sick now he’d never hear the end of it.

He swallowed back the sour bile that pressed in on his tongue as his captain approached him. To Theon’s great satisfaction even he looked a bit pale, a bit sweaty. This did not stop the man from tucking his thumbs in his belt as he slowed to a stop beside him, looking him up and down with a poorly disguised smirk.

“We think Dragonstone is close, m’lord, but we can’t hope to shove in in this storm. Gonna have to wait it out.”

Theon dared not open his mouth so he simply nodded.

The captain shook his head. “Never thought I’d live to see the day where a bloody Greyjoy would be seasick on my ship.”

Theon turned his head, a well-tended vat of bitterness and rage boiling over. It had been a long and contentious few weeks and the past four days had only served to grind away at his frayed nerves like a whetstone. He spat at the captain’s feet, shining his boots with it.

The man drew in a slow breath, smothering whatever instincts born from a harsh life at sea insisted
upon at such an insult. He stared at Theon for a long while before finally shuffling away.

Sure that he was rid of him, Theon hung his head with a moan of misery. They had been sailing for weeks, speeding to the Iron Islands as swiftly as they could to head off his uncle. They had camped for days on a little spit of dry, wasted land on the Salt Shore of Dorne. Huddled in caves and eating mongoose and gull, keeping a weather eye or three out for the conspicuous Iron Fleet hoving its way west.

Theon had given the order five days before-- they had to sail back to Dragonstone. His uncle had either sailed farther away from the coast of Dorne than anticipated, or he hadn’t left at all and they had all been fooled. He was inclined to believe the latter. Either way, the men were starving and poxed and mutiny was only held back by the scantest margin. The men may not hold any love for him, but their love for his sister out paced any hatred for him. For now, at least.

There had been a deep, gnawing longing within him to order the ship west and north, back to those little stony islands that had little else to offer but some bit of respite. Where he could rest upon a scrap of rock and munch on saltfish and smoke a pipe until his dying days.

But thinking of Jon-- his brother in all but blood-- standing there with some hint of forgiveness in his eyes in that dusty throne room, his eyes black with an impossible sympathy ...

Theon had betrayed everyone and everything worth having in his life. He did not intend to start again now.

He closed his eyes, gritting his teeth until he heard them creaking in his ears. He lifted himself and staggered to the little opening for the ladder that led topside. He leaned his face into the sheet of rain that poured in, the cooling water feeling blissful on his fevered brow. He turned, intending to retreat, to lay in misery within the comfort of the small bunk afforded to him.

“M’lord!” came a shout from over the din of the storm. “M’lord! A shipwreck m’lord! Looks to be one of Euron’s!”

Theon bounded up the tiny ladder, his clothes soaked through within seconds. The man who had called after him was pointing starboard and Theon turned to see three of his men pulling a limp, sodden form of a man over the rail.

He stumbled forward, dropping to his knees beside the man. He ducked and sputtered as a wave
smashed over the deck. The rescued man gasped and writhed, eyes rolling in some primal ecstasy that he should still be alive. A black kraken coiled over his boiled leather jerkin.

All of the worry, the despair, the torment of the past weeks came crashing in around him. He fisted both his hands in the man’s shirt, lifting him clean off the deck.

“Where were you headed?” he yelled to make himself heard over the racket of the sea. “What is Euron doing?”

The man looked at him, eyes almost crossing with confusion. He grappled with Theon’s hands, suddenly panicked.

“Where were you headed?” Theon shouted again, feeling frustration flood hot and humid through his veins. Someone grasped him by the shoulder and pulled him away roughly. Theon howled in frustration.

“Leave ‘im be,” someone was pleading with him, “the man was near death. He needs to rest! You can talk to him tomorrow, m’lord!”

Theon’s chest heaved in aborted fury, but he nodded numbly, turning around to look at the man, still sprawled helpless and limp upon the planks.

“Get him below! See he has some broth and water.”

The men surrounding the lost sailor began to gather him up by the shoulders, the ankles, but the man suddenly struggled again their helping hands as if caught in a trap.

“Easy now, lad, we’re tryin’ t’ help you!” one of the men spat sourly.

“You’re too bloody late!” the nearly-drowned man suddenly cried out with a mad cackle. “You’re too late! Your Dragon Queen ‘as lost!”

Theon strode forward, blood going cold. He grabbed the front of the man’s jerkin again and shook him roughly. “What do you mean? What have you done?”
The man looked at him, a bit crazed, a bit wild. He grinned, wide and mostly toothless. “Can’t describe it,” he said with a wheeze, “need t’ see for yerself, Prince Theon.”

Theon froze as the bell from the poor sod in the crow’s nest rang through the tumult of the waves and storm. The man was still grinning up at him, malevolent and victorious. Theon threw him back down on the deck as men rushed to the forecastle to get a better look.

Glowing red and devilish through the gray sheets of rain, Dragonstone burned on the horizon like a dying sun.

+++ 

The sword glowed in his hand, angry and red and shimmering with heat. Sam and Brienne held her at the shoulders, Podrick at her ankles.

He pressed the flat of the blade to the flesh of her thigh. The skin boiled and hissed like magma. The sword trembled in his palms and he cried out as fire leapt up the fullers, blinding and fierce. Steam roiled, filling the air, curling in his nostrils. A terrible scream filled his ears and suddenly her face was inches from his own, hideous in pain and betrayal.

“Murderer!” she snarled as her lips curled and blackened. Her hair came alight and her eyes fell back in their sockets. She clawed at the collar of his tunic, nails drawing blood as they fell away from her fingertips like leaves.

“Your Grace!” someone was shouting, but he couldn’t begin to acknowledge it. Not while her skin dripped from her bones like wax, while her blood flooded the little shack to the tops of his thighs. All of this, and still he could not wrench the blade away, could not dare to save her—

“YOUR GRACE!”

He took in a great, sucking breath, eyes falling open wide and fearful.

Davos’ face swam into his vision. “Your Grace, it’s alright. It’s alright.”
Jon released a tremendous breath as recognition sunk in, his heart pounding in his tongue. He looked away, noticing that his knuckles were white on Davos’ arm. He loosened his grip haltingly, not unlike pulling a well-swung axe from a heart of wood. Davos’s eyes roved over him, lines of concern deeply etched within his skin.

“You gave us quite a fright, Your Grace,” Davos said, casting a worried glance over to the others that must have been gathered by the fire. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

Jon found it impossible to speak, his lungs still catching up, his limbs shaking, mind whirling. He willed himself to sit up more fully, turning his anxious eyes to the little hut at his back. Smoke curled innocently from the chimney. No sound came from within. He sat, frozen beneath the very real truth that she reposed beyond that measly door, reclined in the highest comfort and safety one could afford at the edge of the world-- and another, bizarre fear that the hut contained only blood and smoke and bone-- that death lay beyond that threshold and nothing more.

“Ghost is with her, Your Grace,” Davos said quietly, his kindly voice breaking through the haze of his torment like sun through fog. “If anything was wrong, we’d know.”

The words seeped into him slow and healing. He nodded, turning back to the fire and the knot of people gathered about it. Brienne and Podrick gazed at him, exhausted and worried in equal measure. The Hound and Jorah stared resolutely into the fire.

Jon felt a blush creep up his neck and shame closed in on him like a heavy drape. He wrapped his good arm around his knees, hanging his head. He breathed in, his lungs taking in the chill of the air, the sweet burn of woodsmoke. He felt as if he were floating back into himself, becoming a bit more of this earth with every passing second.

There was a rustle beside him and he lifted his head. Davos held out his sword to him, looking bashful.

“Tried to clean it, as you asked, Your Grace. Did the best we could, but…” He shrugged, helpless, as he passed it over.

Jon took it, movements slow and heavy. The metal gleamed bright as a jewel in the firelight. He lifted it, pulling it closer to his face. His reflection stared back at him, eyes bordered by darkness, pupils blown and black. He twirled the handle within his palm with a thoughtless ease and his reflection disappeared.
The opposite side of the blade was dulled, fogged over by some strange, nefarious mist. Veins of red and black swirled within, slashing through the metal like the grain of some foreign wood. The fullers, once strait and elegant, now stood jagged as ill-tended teeth.

He closed his eyes, bending his head forward, bringing the crossguard to his brow. The metal bit cold and soothing into his fevered skin.

“It is still as fine a blade as any, Your Grace,” Davos said reassuringly. “Can’t see that any structural damage has been done to it, but you will have to have a new scabbard made for it.”

Jon lowered the tip of Longclaw to the ground, nodding slowly. A small, careful smile wound itself over his lips as he looked over at his Hand. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

Davos simply beamed, relieved that his friend had seemingly returned to him from whatever darkness he had resided in since they had arrived with the queen nearly three hours ago. Davos stood, clapping him on his shoulder.

“Come, Your Grace, the search party returned not but an hour ago with the dead and wounded. It would do them well, to see their king.”

Jon hesitated, gazing into the fire. He did not feel much like a king, sitting sodden and grimy among the snow and dirt with so many dead to tend to, to mourn.

*Every great gift exacts a great price.*

He sighed, nothing left within him. He hefted himself to his feet all the same, using his sword as a crutch. He walked with Davos into the woods where Sam and the Night’s Watch brothers had erected something of a makeshift infirmary. Jorah, The Hound, Brienne and Podrick followed without prompting in their wake.

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“We must do something.”
Sansa looked up at him from the scroll she was only half studying. “And what exactly would that be?” she replied, her tone just a bit sour.

Tyrion paced in front of her desk, hands folded and fidgeting behind his back. “Are there not any healers that we can send into the Dothraki camp?”

“I have sent MaesterWolkan,” she said tightly, knowing that it was not enough-- not nearly enough. “He was not happy about it, but he follows my orders. I can do next to nothing if he cannot find helpers to assist him.”

Tyrion shook his head, coming to stand before her desk, not quite meeting her eyes. “When the queen hears of this… well, let’s just say that I would rather row back to Dragonstone than to fall under her inevitable wroth.”

Sansa sighed heavily, leaning back in her chair and tapping a restless finger upon the arm. “I understand your worries, my lord, but what can I possibly do?” She stood to stoke the waning fire within the hearth. “Would you have me force every maester of every holdfast into the camps under pain of death?” She shook her head, hanging the poker upon the mantle with a bit more force than what she intended. “Hatred of people who are different than you is not something I can order away, I’m afraid.”

Tyrion nodded sadly, taking up his chair again. “It does not help that half the northern forces still see the queen as an invader, and the other half think Jon nothing more than a spellbound fool.”

“Aye,” she responded heavily as she stood and fetched the pewter flagon of wine from the sideboard. She filled a goblet and Tyrion accepted it with a grateful nod. “And there is even less of a hope of me changing that as well.” She sat heavily in her chair, sipping her wine. “I had thought that my support may have gained support from those who were loyal to me, but…”

There was a small, slightly hopeless silence that met these words. “I suppose we can only hope that Jon Snow and the queen can break through on their own,” Tyrion said quietly.

“Knowing Jon, I think that is only a matter of time.”

Tyrion smiled, knowing and loving. “Aye, knowing Daenerys Stormborn, I think much the same.”
Sansa sighed and shifted, placing her wine back upon the table and folding her hands in front of her.

“Morale is at an all-time low. Since the Dothraki arrived, there have been fights by the score-- and even more senseless deaths. There would be more, I’m afraid, if it were not for the flux that plagues their camp.” Sansa shook her head, half bewildered, half exasperated. “Why must men behave in such a way?”

Tyrion’s lips twitched as he brought his goblet to his mouth. “If I knew the answer to that question, Lady Sansa, I’d be quite a rich man.”

The corners of her mouth ticked up and she looked to her hands. “Forgive me, my lord, but I knew you to be a rich man already.”

Tyrion smacked his lips as he finished off the last of his cup. “Rich in wits, perhaps, but I’m afraid gold is no longer my tender.”

Sansa huffed an amused breath, searching the fogged over window pane beside her desk. They slipped into a thoughtful quiet once more.

“What if--” she began, stumbling over the dark thoughts that had tumbled into her mind like falling stones. “What if the queen-- what if Jon --”

“Do not think of it, my lady,” Tyrion interrupted gently. “There are few plans to be drawn if such a dreadful thing comes to pass except to hunker down and pray for an early spring or a quick death.”

Sansa swallowed, a black weight of dread clinging to her heart. “When they do return,” she began, her voice rough and wavering, “it should galvanize the people-- throw them all under one banner for good…” she trailed off uncertainty. She looked over at her companion, who gazed back at her sadly. “Right?”

“One would hope so,” he replied within a tired breath. “That frail hope has not been enough for some however.”
Sansa glanced at him in sharp question. “What do you mean?”

“It seems as though some have been trying to take matters into their own hands.”

Tyrion shifted, pulling out a roll of parchment from his belt. He tossed it on her desk and she leaned forward, dragging it towards her with two fingers. She unrolled it hastily, scanning the words scrawled upon it. It was a list of names—nine, in total. “What is this?”

“I was hoping you’d tell me, Lady Sansa,” Tyrion replied, a hint of suspicion in his voice. “That is a list of Stark bannermen that have either gone missing or else have been found in their tents with their throats cut.”

Sansa felt a terrible thrill shoot through her to the very roots of her hair. She read through the names again—Glover, Hornwood, Cerwyn…

“All the men found dead serve lords that have been most… vociferous about their king’s alliance with a Targaryen,” Tyrion continued as Sansa struggled to pack away her mounting panic, only half listening. “It certainly does not help with the morale in question—many of the Northmen seem to believe it is the work of Dothraki—”

She shot to her feet, her chair clattering over the stone so loudly Tyrion stopped mid-sentence to wince. He looked at her, dazed. “Where are you going?” He asked as she marched to the door.

“Who gave you this list?” Sansa asked hotly, breathless, heart hammering in her throat.

Tyrion looked at her, utterly lost. “Well… Lord Varys—”

“And do you know who may have done these things?”

Tyrion blinked at her slowly. “Again, Lady Sansa, I was hoping you would give me such answer.”

She prickled under the glint of accusation in his eyes. “You think I would order such a thing?”
Tyrion shrugged, infuriatingly mild. “I once knew you to not be a killer, my lady. But after the sham execution of Petyr Baelish carried out under your command—”

“Petyr Baelish earned tenfold what he actually received, Lord Tyrion,” she snapped icily. “And I’ll not have you lecture me on justice.” She looked back down at the parchment that she had wrinkled in her fisted hand. “Besides, you told me I was good at this. Why would I command such a foolish thing?”

Tyrion blinked at her, eyes going soft. “You seem to know who is responsible, in any case.”

She wrenched the door open, thoroughly done with this conversation. “Forgive me, my lord.” She curtsied stiffly before rushing down the hall, heading to the training yard— the safest bet to find her sister this time of day.

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Her feet were bare, sinking into the skin of white that lay upon the earth.

She walked and walked, her eyes shifting from the furrows she carved into the pale coat of ash to the blank of the horizon before her. The silence seemed to breathe, in and out, as vast as the empty land she tread upon. Blank scraps of sky fell from the flat clouds above and floated to her naked shoulders.

Her hands warmed and she lifted them before her-- gleaming red stained her fingers, the hue almost blinding. What she had assumed to be falling snow landed upon her wet fingers, melting and curling like old parchment. She realized that it was ash-- pouring around her in a soundless blizzard.

She kept walking. Hours and hours might have passed, perhaps days. She glanced up at a sudden peal of thunder, the clouds overhead sparking and flashing with a molten bruise of purple. The tumult rolled on, echoing forever in the emptiness.

The ash turned to sweet and cooling rain. It flowed down her bare arms, a stream of red. It sluiced through her hair like a new river. The skein of ash coating the ground melted away. Fresh, springy grass grew up between her toes with every stride.
A hill rose up before her and she climbed. The many heads of flowers bowed wetly before her, heavy with new buds. She brushed wondering fingers over every one she could reach. They opened up-- some black and glittering like the mouths of sows, some as pale and pink as the shell of an oyster.

She looked on, helpless, as they withered and curled in on themselves, little red mouths gaping until their petals fell away and they crumbled to dark cinders at her feet. She looked over her shoulder. The trail she had padded through the grass steamed in the rain, the bent blades sizzling and hissing in her wake.

She turned away, tears stinging at her eyes as she turned to the crest of the slope before her. Crowning the head of the hill sat empty bones-- the ruins of a ribcage from some strange and mighty beast of long ago.

She dared to draw closer, something strange and needling pulling her on a thread. A faint cry filtered through the ghostly whisper of the rain. She stepped through the spires of bone, straining to hear. It sounded again, almost the distant howl of a wolf, pining after a lost mate.

She circled around, seeing nothing now but the top of the hill, fog encroaching on all sides, thick as cotton. The cries came constant now, muffled and muted.

She stumbled forward, dropping to her knees at the center of the charred bones. The ground beneath her was soft and silty. It clung to her bare knees like moss.

She dug her hands into the dark clay, clawing at the earth, tears biting at her eyes. She scrabbled against root and stem and sucking soil until she came upon what she desired.

From the black earth she plucked a babe, skin new and pink, mouth twisted and squalling. She sobbed, pulling the child to her breast as she brushed black mud from its brow with a loving thumb.

The babe stilled, blinking up at her in wonder. She looked on as eyes dark as pitch met her own and--

A searing pain snatched her from that rainy slope as good as a strike from a snake. She gasped, her lungs burning, as if she had been underwater for hours and had just now come up for air.
“I’m sorry! I’m so sorry, Your Grace!” someone was pleading, but she couldn’t really think of it, her mind locked in agony and confusion, her breath not truly catching in her lungs. She clawed at the furs covering her, suffocating, imprisoned. She plunged her hands to the tops of her thighs, ready to feel the warm slick of blood. She dragged her palms over her belly, searching, questing—

“Your Grace! It’s alright! It’s okay—”

“Sam,” she rasped as her eyes focused, her brain finally firing with recognition. She fist a hand in his bloody jerkin. “What happened-- the baby?”

Sam blinked at her, his previous fear falling away, replaced with abject confusion and concern. “Your Grace-- I’m sorry. What… baby?”

“My--” she started, faltering. Her panic sloughed away like old skin and her senses crashed her back to earth. She looked down at her lap, unclasping her hand from Sam’s shirt as her heart clamored within her chest. Huge, ragged gasps racked her shoulders. Her hands shook before her as she searched for the child that had just laid so warm and real in her arms.

“Your Grace, it’s alright… it’s okay.” Sam’s rushed words of comfort filtered through her brain like a slow leak. He placed careful hands on her shoulders, trying to gently push her back into the pillows. She went, haltingly, her eyes questing for answers within the rough pine walls and packed dirt floor.

Sam bent to retrieve the bowl and rag he had dropped in his alarm and she suddenly became very aware of many things at once. Her left leg throbbed with a seam of liquid heat. Her palms and fingers were sticky with some sort of salve, sore and raw and smarting. A sullen, stinging pain in her right shoulder lanced up her neck with even the smallest movement. Her vision swam and she closed her eyes tight as she fumbled at the edge of a cliff of panic.

“It’s alright, Your Grace,” Sam repeated, continuing his ministrations on a cut just below her ear. The smell of whatever imbued the rag he was holding centered her. She breathed it in— pine and camphor and something distantly alcoholic.

“Where are we, Sam?” She asked after several long breaths.

“A trapper’s hut, just south of Castle Black, Your Grace,” he answered, placing the bowl and rag down on a small table beside her little cot. He settled himself on a stool, leaning forward. “Do you
She blinked, looking away. “I remember… falling.”

“Aye, that you did Your Grace,” he said sadly. “Luckily though, your dragon caught you. Or at least that’s what Jon said—“

“Jon,” she gasped, sitting more upright though pain shot from seemingly every nerve. “Is Jon alright? Is he—“

“He’s fine, Your Grace,” Sam said with a tiny, knowing smile as he urged her back into the pillows. “He’s got a sore shoulder and some cuts and whatnot, but he’s quite alright.”

Dany’s eyes roved about the room, as if he would appear before her like a ghost. “Where is he?” She asked, voice small, trying very hard to keep the bitter note of betrayal from her words.

“Went to look for your dragons,” Sam answered as he stood, walking to the fire. He pulled a kettle off with a metal hook and poured the steaming liquid into a small, earthen bowl. “He was going mad sitting here. He’s never been good at idleness, Your Grace.”

She sat, swallowing the rush of shame that rose up from her belly like bile. He had gone to tend to her sons and she sat here like a sour child. “I am sorry, my friend,” she found herself saying.

Sam looked at her incredulously. “You’re apologizing to me?” He chuckled, shaking his head as he came over with the bowl. “I’m the one who should be apologizing… I’m the one who woke you.” He sat back on his stool, looking at her kindly. “Jon will be here soon enough, Your Grace. Ghost went to go find him soon as you woke.”

She nodded, feeling numb, her emotions in such a violent swirl she did not where to safely land. Sam stood again, restless. He walked to the table again, shifting rolls of linen and lifting vials of various tinctures and potions to the light of the fire, checking their levels.

“My…” she cleared her throat, unable to form the word on her tongue. “The dragon?” She asked, mouth going dry and scratchy.
Sam paused in his toil and looked at her sadly. She turned her head away, feeling shame lay its heavy weight over her once again. He stepped around the little table to stand next her cot once more.

“The dragon is dead, Your Grace,” he said softly. “You did it… we’ve won. For now at least.”

She felt heat press at the back of her eyes and she bit her lip, nodding after a time. They had done what they had set out to do, and she was not sure if she ever had felt more defeated in her life.

She heard Sam step away and then back again and she smelled something heavenly. She opened her eyes to see the little earthen bowl held before her, steaming and inviting. “Are you ready to eat now, Your Grace?” Sam asked as he pulled the stool closer to the bed. “I have to help you.”

Dany suddenly felt like a child-- weak and useless and hopeless in the face of her loss. She looked down at her hands, red and angry-- shining with salve. Something savage twisted within her belly, missing Jon like a severed limb-- not quite of this earth, her skin ill-fitting and itchy. It enraged her.

“Sam,” she croaked. “Please--”

There was a small, defeated pause, before she heard him place the bowl down on the stool. “It’s here, if you want it, Your Grace.”

With that, she listened to his footsteps and the scrape of the door pulling open, closed.

She allowed herself a wretched sob, the sound tearing from deep within her chest, leaving clawmarks of heat and pain. She pressed her face into her palms, the sticky balm smearing with her hot tears.

The mournful wail of her son, the flash of heat as he was finally freed of his torment. The cool, rainy slope. The black-eyed babe, smelling of new clay, little fists flailing and grasping.

She pressed frantic, probing fingers to her belly, tossing her head back into the pillows with a cry.

“You once told me that your dreams have a habit of coming true.”
She closed her eyes, biting down on her lip until it almost bled. She folded her arms over her chest, grip tight through the lancing pain in her shoulder.

*Just a dream,* she told herself, *nothing more.*

It was natural, she told herself, to think him capable of giving her such an impossible thing.

From the moment she saw him, everything about Jon seemed miraculous. The very nature of his *existence* defied all reason. Wonders great great and small, spectacular and mundane, seemed to sprout around his every stride like new saplings. A man born in a world that taught their boys to fear the strong woman, to detest all things that challenged the male hegemony-- thoroughly unafraid, fully enraptured by her. A man with only goodness in his heart and love on his lips.

Her fingers tightened in the furs as she bit back her tears, flailing against the tumult in her chest, the blackness in her breath.

She craved only the shine of his eyes, the grounding callus of his palms-- something real and warm that she could cling to within the storm that gripped her now.

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Davos watched his king carefully.

They had filtered through the throngs of injured men for hours. Jon had not hesitated once to reach out, to grasp the blood-slicked hand of a crying soldier as an arrow was plucked from his flesh. To press a branch between the teeth of a future amputee. To wrap clean linen around the missing eye of his fast friend, Tormund Giantsbane.

They had staggered back to the fire and Jon had stared at the door of the hut, shoulders twitching under the cloak that Davos had returned to him. Davos had entreated rest, a meal, but Jon had steadfastly refused, locked in a heady spell of worry that Davos suspected would not be broken until the queen returned to him fully.

Instead, they had found fresh mounts and now were questing for the queen’s children and any sign
of what have become of the Night King.

Davos recalled those eternal hours after they had delivered the queen into Sam’s care. The memory, though still relatively young, hung hazy and rough-edged in his mind. He remembered a hideous wail, then a terrible, damning silence.

Jon had staggered from the hut then, a vision of misery. His armor had been shucked away, his sleeves bunched at his elbows. Longclaw had hung loosely from his right hand, bruised with blood and char, while his left arm had been bound up in a hasty sling. His forearm had gleamed cold and black with blood in the white light of the moon. Steam had curled from his skin. His filthy hair had clung to his face and jaw like kelp. His eyes had shone bright and wild and restless— the dark hollows of his sockets casting him in an alien, skeletal glow.

Davos did not know if that gruesome image would ever leave him. He had thought for an eternal moment that they had been too late, that she—

“If you stare at me much longer, Ser Davos, I think you may just burn a hole through my hauberk.”

Davos shook his head, breaking out of the dark fog of his thoughts slowly. “Forgive me, Your Grace,” he said as Jon smiled at him, small but good natured all the same. “I cannot help worrying.”

“You’ve ever been the worrier, my friend.”

“Aye, well it is my job to worry about my king.” Davos responded somewhat sourly, “most especially when it seems he has no regard for himself.”

Jon was silent for a beat, face suddenly stony and sullen. “I have regard for my life, Davos,” he replied. “Perhaps I had little before, but—”

Davos stilled, waiting for him to go on, but Jon only shook his head.

“Aye,” Davos finally ventured, surrendering any hope for answers his king would freely give. Jon always had to do things the hard way. “You have earned the love of a woman.”
Davos looked over for Jon’s reaction, but his face remained impassive. He watched as his king cast a surreptitious glance over his shoulder, checking where the others might be. The Hound rode well ahead, while Brienne and Podrick walked their tired horses slowly in their wake. Jorah had stayed behind to guard the queen.

Davos didn’t know why he bothered-- everyone already knew. It wasn’t as if his king (or the queen, for that matter) really made any effort to hide it.

“I remember when I first met my wife,” Davos continued, shifting in his saddle with a wince. He had never been truly comfortable on the back of a horse. “A woman can make a man feel as mortal as a babe and as immortal as a god-- it is a vexing and dangerous thing.”

Still, Jon offered nothing, eyes trained on the horizon.

“Oh, come off it!” Davos nearly shouted, his frustration boiling over, patience long since run dry. “I am your bloody Hand, Jon. If you tell me nothing, then I might as well ride back to where I came from and wait until the Dead come for me and mine!”

Jon, to his credit, looked ashamed. “I am sorry, my friend,” he said heavily as he shook his head. “You have been as faithful a friend and Hand to me as I could ever hope for. You deserve better.” He looked to his reins, fidgeting. “I am not accustomed to this…” He waved a hand to the world at large, “to being king.”

Davos nodded, but said nothing, sensing that his friend had more to say.

“Truth is,” Jon began with just a hint of a rueful smirk, “I’m not accustomed to any of it, Davos. I was born and reared a bastard, never truly wanted or belonging anywhere.” He hung his head again with a tiny, astonished laugh. “I joined the Night’s Watch. I told myself I could find purpose there. And by the gods, I grew accustomed to a future of dread and dreariness. And in less than a year--” he huffed, defeated, shaking his head in strange wonder.

Davos grinned, despite himself. His king had many talents, but fine articulation was not one of them.

“And in less than a year you went from swearing to hold no lands or titles, wife or children,” Davos provided, “to having some and the potential for all.”
Jon looked at him, something queer in his face. Something like disbelief, amusement, and torment all at once. “Aye,” he replied slowly and then they were silent for such a long time, Davos had nearly decided the conversation over. “Daenerys says she can’t have children.”

“Load of horse shit, if you ask me,” Davos quipped immediately. Jon laughed and the sound was like a bracing wind to Davos. He looked down at his hands with a smile. “So she’s talked to you about children, has she?”

Jon blushed, looking away as if he was scanning the horizon. “Aye.”

“Forgive me, Your Grace,” Davos said, his tone tilted in mock bewilderment, “Is that common conversation when speaking to a military ally?”

Jon snorted despite himself, resting a wrist on the horn of his saddle, relaxing his seat a bit. Davos looked on at his king’s ease of riding with no small amount of envy.

“I feel like she told me to test me-- to keep me away.” Davos saw a flash of teeth before Jon turned his face away again. “As if that would deter me from everything else about her.”

“Your Grace…” Davos began, searching for the right words, the correct tone. “I am happy for you. Truly. There isn’t another woman in the world I could have wished to catch your eye.” He cleared his throat, leaning towards him, voice low and careful. “But you must understand-- I must know what you intend to do.”

Jon paused, blinking at the sun that was just now capping the snowy hills with a pale gold. “I intend to marry her.”

Davos leaned back, a bit stunned, not expecting such a straightforward answer. He coughed and looked away. “I wonder when I might have found this out if I had not pressed you. Perhaps the very day itself.”

“Don’t dishonor yourself, Davos,” Jon chided. “As I’ve said, I’ve not grown accustomed to any of this myself.”

Davos tilted his head, conciliatory. “As your friend I must congratulate you, but as your advisor, I must ask-- are you truly prepared for all that?”
Jon’s brow crinkled as he looked at his reins, before turning the question in his eyes to him.

“Forgive me, Your Grace, but-- well, you are not the most enthusiastic ruler,” Davos said quickly, glancing over at him in a fit of nerves. “A just ruler, a worthy ruler, aye, but you do not take much joy in your command.” Davos watched as Jon seemed to slouch in on himself, turning inward. “Marrying Daenerys Targaryen-- well, that is a life of ruling and royalty if I’ve ever seen one.”

Jon blinked, frowning-- not as though he had not considered this very real circumstance before. Quite the contrary, Davos got the distinct impression that his king had thought on it at quite some length. No, the nature of his hesitancy lay with the intimacy of the words to describe it.

“When I was named Lord Commander, Davos, I had no one,” Jon finally began, voice dark and heavy with well-buried truths. “When I was named King in the North, I had no one. I may have had my sister and you, aye, but Lord Commander or King or bastard... I have been alone in every decision. I had to fight to join the Night's Watch. I had to fight to let the wildlings south of The Wall. I had to fight to get my home back. I even had to fight to go to Dragonstone.”

Jon paused, fisting his hand upon his thigh as he took in a steadying breath, the subject obviously striking a nerve. “I have carried loneliness with me all my life, Ser Davos.” He looked over at him, voice gone quiet. “ Ruling is not one lonely battle after another when we are together... she makes everything more... real. More possible.”

Davos couldn’t help but grin, feeling something warm and effusive bleed through him despite all his fretting. “I suppose that answers my question then.”

Jon flashed him a thankful smile and they rode on in silence for a time. After just under an hour, The Hound drew to a halt in front of them from the top of a hill. He turned and sat his horse, waiting for the rest of them to catch up, his hand resting on his sword. Jon kicked his horse to a canter and Davos followed closely behind.

“What the Seven Hells is that?” The Hound asked as they pulled to the top of the hill, nodding down the hill.

Great, fearsome blue spikes of ice ripped from the earth below them. They stood slanted and sharp, glittering in the new sun like strange, fearsome teeth. Jon hesitated, before nudging his horse carefully down the snowy slope.
As they drew closer, Davos could see that the ring of icy blades surrounded a crater, the depth of which stood taller than the withers of a destrier. Davos watched as Jon inched his flighty mare down the steep wall of the crater, the ground soft and silky as ash.

Davos followed, though a deep foreboding gripped his heart. This was not the crash site of some meteor-- this was made by something not quite of this mortal plane.

Jon dismounted and knelt within the ashy grave. He pulled a glove from his good hand somewhat awkwardly, before raking naked fingers through the soft earth.

“What is this?” Brienne asked quietly as she trod carefully through the spikes of ice, leaving her horse at the top.

“The Night King had to have fallen from his mount,” Jon answered solemnly, rubbing his dusty fingers together. “This must have been where he fell.”

“Who could’ve survived such a fall?” Podrick asked breathlessly as he reached out to touch one of the spires of ice that rimmed the crater.

“Not who, but what,” the Hound growled as he wheeled his horse to and fro at the top of the site, not daring to venture further.

“The Night King was once a man, Clegane,” Jon answered coolly as he attempted to pull his glove back on with some difficulty. Davos hurried forward to aid him and Jon did not protest his help. “Calling him anything more does him too much credit.”

The Hound sneered. “Then where the bloody hells is he, Snow?” he called. “Any man would have died from such a fall. He got up and bloody walked away because he is a demon.”

Jon nodded. “You’re right, my friend. Any normal man would have died on impact, but I think it foolish to presume he left this crater unscathed.”

The Hound grunted in clear disbelief. Davos turned back to Jon, his nerves jangling, itchy to be rid of this place. “I think it best we head back now, Your Grace.”
Jon shook his head, shifting his lame arm within its sling with a wince. “We have yet to find the queen’s sons, my lord.”

Davos nodded sadly at this. “Aye, Your Grace, but I think if they wanted to be found-- we would have discovered them by now.” He shrugged, turning to mount his horse. “They are dragons, after all, Your Grace. They are not easily hidden.”

Jon opened his mouth to protest when a mournful cry split through the air like a thunderbolt. All heads turned to the southwest-- the direction they had come. Jon swung up onto his horse and kicked her up the slope, Davos, Brienne and Podrick following suit.

They rode hard up the hill, pulling to a stop at the top. Another howl rang through the emptiness and a pale bolt of fur burst from the wood below them. Before Davos could even fully register what it meant, Jon had dug his heels into his horse’s sides and was plunging down the hill.

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Jon leapt from his horse before it had even fully stopped. He mindlessly tossed his reins to a bewildered Podrick and was through the door of the shack with more clatter and clamor than he intended.

He staggered into the dim, sweltering room, unable to fully reconcile what he had seen just hours before with what lay before him now.

She rose up in the narrow bed, red eyes blinking and dazed. He paused, taking her in as his chest heaved in a rhythm of astonishment. She lay pale as bone among the dark furs. Salve and potion shined from red slices on her brow, her cheek, her jaw, her ear. Sam had washed the soot and blood from her face, had bound up her hair in a bolt of cloth. She looked queer— weak and fragile—nothing of the strength or fire of the dragon left to her. It made his heart clench in agony within his chest.

“Jon,” she whispered and he closed the gap between them.

She emitted a tiny gasp of pain into his neck as he lifted her into his good arm. He released her immediately, lowering her back into the pillows with a careful hand.
“I’m so sorry,” he managed through his stumbling breath.

She smiled, wan and tired. She reached for him, searching for his heat like a lifeline. He grabbed the stool beside the bed, pulling it underneath him as he took up her wrist. He rubbed his forefinger and thumb over the fine bones, feeling her pulse pound warm and real under his palm.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, now feeling quite… useless. “Are you in much pain?”

She shook her head, looking at him with both wonder and sadness, as if she was not quite certain he was actually real—a fever dream come to haunt her not for the first time. Something stinging and acidic flooded him, making his fingers close tighter around her arm as he ducked his head. “I am fine. Especially now.”

Jon pressed his brow to the curl of her knuckles, trying to get a proper hold of himself. He felt soft fingertips venture into his hairline.

“We’ve done it,” she whispered.

“You’ve done it,” he said earnestly as he looked up at her. She nodded sadly, biting her lip and Jon reached out, brushing a tender thumb over her cheek, his heart breaking again and again. “Though… I know it must not seem much of a victory for you, Daenerys.”

To his great surprise she choked back an astonished breath. Her eyes sparked in the firelight and for an instant, Jon saw the fire he had so long cherished and so long missed kindle within her once more. “You know me too well, my love.”

Jon felt his heart pound at the top of his tongue. He blinked, dumbly, as all his blood fell to his feet.

He had fallen in love with her only a matter of months ago and it seemed like it had been years and mere moments all at once. Loving her was etched in his bones. It came all too easily, as natural to him as heft of his sword. Thoughtless, heedless.

Thinking about her loving him— that was a notion far too mighty for him to shoulder. She thought
that she could kill him with the gape of dragon’s teeth, with the tilt of a chin and the swing of an arak—little did she know that she could strike him dead much easier than all that. A turn of her pale head, the dulling of her eyes and he’d wither to nothing. In that terrible knowledge, he had become a coward. He had locked the word love away like the snarling, tricksome beast it was and hoped it would be good enough for however long he had left.

He could not possibly speak, mouth dry, staring at her like she had drawn a knife on him, the blade tickling at his jugular.

Daenerys laughed. “I’ve been such a fool.”

He was paralyzed, rendered mute and idle as she shook her head, a mournful smile winding slowly over her lips.

“I love you, Jon Snow,” she said, voice a weak, wavering thing, “And I know you love me.” She swallowed, lashes fluttering, spangled with the dew of tears. “And I have been a fool for not telling you every day since you came back to me from a frozen lake at the edge of the world. Since the day you left me on Dragonstone. For a hundred days before that.”

Jon lunged forward, pressing his starving mouth to her own, unable to fill his lungs without her breath on his tongue. She opened her lips beneath him, hot and needy. He pulled away, just slightly, exploring the rough green ridges of her irises, the blue shadows that made him think of the glimmer of ancient and forgotten water, the dark and shining walls of an unreachable, holy cave.

“I always knew you to be braver than me,” he rasped with an inexplicable smile.

She returned his smile fully and he felt it warm him as good as a torch. “Would you like for me to take it back? Have I overstepped?”

Jon grinned again, shaking his head as he pulled away slowly. He sat back onto the stool, still grasping her sticky hand.

“What an awful courtier I’ve been,” he said with a snort as he looked down at their hands.

She laughed, looking away and shaking her head. “It is simply unforgivable, Jon Snow. What is to be done with you?”
The smile on her face, the music of her laughter, it all became too much. “Gods, Daenerys,” he gasped, “you cannot know how good it is to see you—” he halted, the word ‘alive’ too heavy, too edged with finality to properly pass through his lips.

She turned her face to look at him, her eyes slanted with sadness, with a well-tended worry. “I am so sorry, Jon. I do not know the pain I have caused and-- I am sorry to have put you through such torment.”

“Do you not remember?” he nearly whispered. “Anything?”

Daenerys turned away, her expression reminding him of a desperate refugee-- raking through the dry ashes of a dead fire to find that one, last brilliant ember to keep the wolves away.

“I remember falling, and I remember waking up-- I remember—” she halted, her throat seeming to close up against something black and perilous. She extricated her hand from his grasp and looked upon her empty palms in an oddly blank grief. Her eyes swam to somewhere very, very far away.

“Daenerys?” he prompted carefully. She shook her head, returning to herself. She took up his hand again, grip tighter, knuckles gone white.

“Tell me.”

“Your leg--” he began, words snagging and catching in his tight throat, “we couldn’t… we couldn’t stop the bleeding. At least at first.” She looked over at him, her face impassive, closed. Jon placed a careful hand on her thickly bandaged thigh, swallowing. “I’m-- I’m not sure what it will look like.”

He slammed his eyes shut, the haunting sound of her screams ricocheting in his ears, Longclaw trembling beneath his palms, the smell of copper curling in his nose-- burning, burning.

He felt cool fingertips under his chin, tilting it up with the slightest pressure. He blinked, her face a picture of peace before him.

“Jon,” she said softly, a corner of her mouth ticking up. His name on her lips-- unfettered and
unadorned, it broke him open. “I’m here, now. I’m here with you. Tell me, please… what happened?”

Jon cleared his throat, shaking his head to banish those fearsome ghosts that would surely always sit upon his weary shoulders.

“We couldn’t close it—” his voice failed, and his throat clicked. “Sam said it was the… the Valyrian steel… cuts different from other metals. He said the only solution was to… to burn it--cauterize it.” He paused, averting his eyes, swallowing hard. “But you fell through a cloud of dragonfire like it was naught but mist—”

He shook his head again, the image of her falling like a star through such an inferno-- what a mighty and horrifying thing to behold.

“It saved you from the fire, but it also almost spelled your doom, Daenerys.” He brushed two knuckles over the ridge of her reddened cheek. “Soldering the wound with conventional metals… it would not work.”

He looked on as she bit her lip, a bitter of edge of betrayal digging into her skin like a tick. Her great strength also her great liability. He squeezed her knuckles between both his palms.

“I-- I did a stupid thing. I was so fucking scared, Daenerys-- I drove Longclaw into the fire and--” his throat closed in again and he tried to steady himself, ducking his head. “You woke up…” He closed his eyes against the images that burned through his mind like spirits. “I am not a healer, Daenerys… I don’t bring life. I take it. You woke up and I thought-- I thought I had killed you.”

He looked up at her and his world was sparked in a riot of color-- tears standing hot and damning in his eyes.

“But-- it saved you and you… you may carry the mark forever, but you are here and I am sure I will never achieve a higher honor for as long as I live.”

There was a short, impossibly heavy silence as both parties took in these words. Daenerys stared up at the rafters, trying to coalesce, to draw herself back in. He wished that he could reach forward, that he could pluck the silences of their lives from the space between the noise. He wish that he could gather them all together in his palms l ike precious stones, throw them in a hot forge and temper them true-- into a fine and rich armor to wrap around them both like a ward. Neither axe nor hammer, friend nor foe would ever touch them again.
“Thank you,” she finally managed, voice small and constricted, forced through a small space.

He laughed. “I think you know as well as I do that your thanks is not needed.”

There was another protracted silence-- a quiet that did not sit still. He waited, though he was impatient. He watched as Daenerys seemed to wrestle with something great and savage within her, something deeply personal, something she dared not bring into the orange light of the little shack just yet. Finally, she turned her face towards him once more.

“Will you still have me... scarred as I am?” Her tone was airy, joking. She even smiled at him, but something about the expression was unsure, needy.

Jon felt a stab of astounded outrage within his belly that she could even think such a thing. He tamped it down with a careful hand, knowing that anger had no place here.

“Scars mean you've healed. You’ve lived.” He touched his fingers to his chest, plucking at the first few lacings of his hauberk, pulling the hem back, bearing the truth of what he spoke that he bore on the flesh of his chest. “I’d rather a thousand scars, Daenerys.”

She simply beamed at him, something of a happy sob escaping her lips like a trapped bird. He wasn’t sure he’d ever witnessed a lovelier sight.

“Besides,” he said, leaning forward, trying to latch onto this levity they had somehow found, “we match now.” He gestured to his eye, where the long scar left from an eagle’s talons still lay red and shining in his skin. Daenerys lifted careful fingers, to her right brow, pressing in curiosity.

She bit her lip. “Well… I suppose no one needs an entire eyebrow.”

Jon barked out a laugh and nodded. “It will only make you look more fearsome, my queen.”

She smiled, small and secret and just for him and she lowered her hand back to her lap with a wince.
‘My queen’,” she repeated back, with a pleased hum. She looked over at him with dark eyes. “I should like it much better when it’s official.”

“You mean to marry me as soon as we get back to Winterfell?”

“I mean to marry you right here in this hellish shack, Jon Snow, but if you insist on waiting, Winterfell will have to suffice.”

Jon felt something very peculiar grow up in his chest-- something hot and bubbling and dangerous like a geyser. He hung his head and let out a long, slow, healing breath.

“Why should we find each other in such hell?” he whispered into the dark, “Why must the sky be falling around our shoulders? Why should these evil days be ours?”

She was silent for a long moment before she looked back to him, a tiny smile alighting on her lips. “Every great gift exacts a great price.”

He managed a watery smile back. “Aye.”

“How are my sons?” Daenerys asked after another long moment of quiet.

Jon felt shame soak into his bones and he shifted on the stool. “We could not find them.”

She looked to her lap, pulling her lips over her teeth. She looked more unworried than he had previously thought. “They mourn their brother.”

“Aye,” he replied roughly, “I am so sorry, Daenerys.”

She shook her head, defiant and aggrieved all at once. “It had to be done. It was--” she stopped and Jon squeezed her hand. He knew that she meant to justify the murder of her own son-- but such a thing could not be fully rationalized. No matter if that child had mutated beyond recognition, had posed a very real and evil threat to multitudes.
“The Night King,” she breathed after a moment, her voice taking on a poisonous edge. “What of the demon who stole my son?”

“We found a crater,” he began haltingly, not entirely sure how to explain such a thing. “We think he-- well, he got away.”

Jon saw the muscles around Daenerys’ jaw pop from under her skin like roots, her brow stitching together in clear fury.

“When do we leave for Winterfell?” she asked after a beat, her voice dark-- volatility crackling under her words like lightning.

“As soon as you are well enough to ride.”

“That will take much too long,” she protested. “We need to get back as soon as we can.”


She shook her head, at a loss and not at all happy about it. In that moment, she looked as exhausted as Jon had ever seen her.

“That is a conversation for tomorrow, I think,” he said slowly. “You need rest, my love.”

She did not answer and he pulled away to leave.

Her fingers snagged within his own as he rose from the stool. He looked at her in shock and in question, suddenly flung back to the quiet creak of rope and timber, to a dim cabin on an unfamiliar ship.

“You need rest too, my king,” she said quietly, looking at their ensnared hands before pulling her eyes up to his own.
To deny her then would be to deny the air in his lungs, the blood in his heart. He nodded, though he did not fully understand how the both of them would fit together in such a measly little bed.

She detached her hand long enough to shuffle herself sideways along the bed, wincing and yelping the whole while.

“Daenerys--” he warned.

“Oh, stop it,” she snapped, coming to final resting spot, sweat beading her brow, chest heaving with exertion. “Sam says rest is the best for me. I cannot rest properly in this strange place unless you are with me.”

Jon shook his head in defeat, knowing full well that she was fibbing-- if just a bit, and strode forward to find himself a comfortable enough perch upon the small lip of bed left to him.

+++ 

Davos entered the shack carefully. It had been at least two hours since his king had disappeared into the little hut, and he was starting to worry.

He found them, folded and faded like old parchment within the bed.

Under any other circumstance, he would have found it embarrassing, impertinent, to find his king in such a state. Under any other circumstance, he would have backed from the room as quickly as if he had discovered that it was full of hissing vipers.

But seeing Jon, his head tilted back on the wall, cheek leaned against the crown of her head-- sound asleep though one leg dangled off the edge of the bed, healed him more than he could say. Likewise, the queen had burrowed into the crook of his arm and currently snored and drooled onto his hauberk like a babe.

Davos beamed and headed back through the little door. He closed it, spreading his legs wide and folding his hands in front of him. If anyone dared to disturb them, healer or no, they would have to cut him down first.
Jaime winced as his horse stumbled yet again through the knee-deep snow.

“Well, isn’t this just the shit?” Bronn asked from atop his own, equally clumsy mare.

“It is quite tiresome, I’ll give you that,” Jaime conceded. “Not sure if my stones have ever taken such a pounding.”

Bonn snorted. “I’d rather you keep the details of your sex life to yourself, if it’s all the same to you.”

“I take offense to that, my friend,” Jaime said as he shifted in his saddle. “You tell me every detail of your sex life whenever you open your godsdammed mouth.” Bronn tilted his head, raising his eyebrows in agreement. “Besides,” Jaime continued, “you’ve been a right annoying sod since we left The Twins. If we don’t get to Winterfell soon, I might just have to kill you.”

Bronn guffawed. “Good thing Winterfell is just over that hill there, eh?” he said with a wave of his hand.

Jaime squinted, the sun brilliant and obnoxious over the sheet of white that covered everything in sight. He could just make out the familiar yet alien towers of the castle swimming on the horizon.

“Well, fuck me,” Jamie breathed, “I had no idea we were so close.” Bronn shrugged in answer. “Do they know we are coming?” Jamie asked and again Bronn shrugged. “They don’t know that we’re coming?” Jamie nearly shouted, outraged.

“Are they not expecting us already?” Bronn asked sourly.

“Well-- yes,” Jaime replied haltingly. “But we are nearly four days late-- and besides it’s just… well, it’s just common courtesy.”

“What would you have me do, Kingslayer?” Bronn asked, outraged. “We got no bloody ravens. I sent a few scouts ahead-- they probably got the word to whatever scouts those bloody Northerners
have floating about. Besides…” Bronn continued, looking towards the castle in question and nodding as the sound of a horn blast echoed quietly towards them. “Something tells me they know we’re coming at any rate.”

Jamie sighed, deciding it a lost cause. “Well, I think I should ride forward at any rate,” he said. “Would you care to join me? You’d be the first pick to all the finest whores the North has to offer.”

Bronn’s eyebrows ticked up at that and they rode forward, galloping as best they could through the thick, powdery snow.

After what seemed ages, they were riding through the vast swath of Dothraki camps that curtained the south of Winterfell. Not one person took any notice of them and Jaime marvelled at the lack of security-- Cersei would have never allowed such a thing: two armed and mounted strangers passing unmolested through her armies’ lines.

They drew ever nearer, and the horns blared again, and the bells sounded deep and booming from the little sept that Winterfell afforded.

“Now, that’s quite a welcome,” Bronn shouted over the din as Dothraki left their tents and hovels, shoving their way towards the main gates of Winterfell.

Already, a great throng had gathered at the gates and Jaime and Bronn picked their way carefully through it with their horses, looking at each with bewilderment and satisfaction in equal measure.

As Jaime broke through the thick crowd, a tremendous cheer rang through all those gathered-- Dothraki on one side, Northmen on the other-- and Jaime dared not think it belonged to him. He looked over his shoulder and his heart leapt into his throat.

“Something tells me that they aren’t cheering for us and our bloody army,” Bronn muttered as he drew level with him, seeing exactly what he was seeing.

The King in the North rode his inky black horse carefully through the crowds that jostled and cheered around him. Between his arms that held the reins, rested the Dragon Queen, looking pale and battered and fierce all at once. Her legs were turned to side-saddle, bandaged and bloodied. Her body was simply swallowed up within the wolf’s fur of that damned magnificent cloak Jon Snow always insisted upon wearing. Her right leg was bound so tight it was nearly horizontal from where
she sat-- but she looked over the heads of her subjects with eyes as fierce as those of a hawk, as if she rode upon nothing more than a litter.

“The dragon is dead! The dragon is bloody dead! All hail the King and Queen, you shits!” some giant of a man with a red beard and a bandaged eye shouted as he walked Jon Snow and his charge through the press of eager eyes and bodies.

Jaime watched as the party moved forward, beleaguered but also strangely triumphant. That was when he saw Brienne, drawing a four horse team that dragged the gruesome and mighty head of some ancient beast behind them like a trophy. She caught his eye, shocked, almost terrified. He nodded to her, and she nodded back, her face turning pleased, knowing.

Bronn leaned towards him as shouts of “Long live the queen! Long live the king!” began to rise up around them-- in the Common Tongue and others alike. “I think we might have picked the winning team, eh?”

+++
sacrificethemtothesquid for her 'faded and folded together like old newsprint' line from *Length and Breath of Fury Road*, still one of my biggest inspirations.

underwater_owl for dangerous women killing their men with a look, not a knife.

King Theoden for "evil days".

*And myself for the "desperate refugee" image I'm obsessed with.*

Thank you all for your patience and your support of this mad wreck of a yarn. Hope you enjoy some peace and quiet for our heroes.

**PS: If you enjoy this story, make sure to hit up this poll and nominate it for whatever category you deem worthy.** It'd mean the world! :D
Chapter Summary

She shook her head, not ready, unsure if she ever *would* be ready-- for good or ill. She was warring within herself-- to bring her secrets into the light of day, to let her most trusted friend look upon what dread thing had plagued her for an age… or to curl under her furs and sleep it away, until all the fell deeds were done, until her fears of it being a trick, some evil, short-lived ghost, a demon in her blood, melted away within the river of time.

“It is the change in diet, my friend,” she finally managed. “These Northerners eat rich.”

Chapter Notes

Smut ahoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“How did it go, Your Grace?”

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“About as well as you would predict,” she replied dryly as she sipped her water.

Qyburn tilted his head at that as he stepped closer. “Forgive me, but Euron Greyjoy is historically unpredictable, Your Grace.”

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“He threatened to sail to Winterfell and present Daenerys Targaryen with a marriage offer and his ‘fat cock’,” she said with a smirk.
“Quite a wordsmith,” Qyburn muttered, “and what did you say to convince him otherwise, Your Grace?”

Cersei allowed herself a satisfied chuff. “It is of no concern. He went, did he not?”

“Aye, that he did,” Qyburn offered, “but, as I’ve said, Euron is of a notoriously fickle nature.”

“He’ll hold fast, my friend,” Cersei said lightly, folding her hands in her lap.

“And what of the baby?” her Hand asked, eyes dropping to her belly. Cersei had ordered the best tailors across the realm to attend to her... specific clothing needs. All were well-versed in cleverly hiding a surreptitious pregnancy.

She shifted in her chair, suddenly tense, her shoulders inching up. “He does not know.” She clenched her fist and smiled. “And he never shall.” She took another sip from her cup and relaxed into her chair. “I don’t suspect that I will ever see the beast again.”

Qyburn looked unconvinced, but said nothing.

Cersei felt a flush of agitation wash up her spine at her Hand’s needling, his seeming lack of faith in their plan. She shot from her chair, pulling her lips over her teeth and pacing to the cold window across her solar.

“The Dothraki are her children,” she began through clenched teeth, “the slaves are her children.” She looked down to her belly, clutching it protectively. “I know well the wrath of a mother-- the madness that overcomes a woman when her children are in danger, when they hurt, when they die.”

She paused, looking back to her Hand, who sat frozen and pale in his seat. “We shall see what madness lays behind those pretty eyes, Qyburn, and lure the dragon from her nest of wolves.”

+++
Dany had called away Tyrion and Varys, who had descended upon her like a pair of curious crows as soon as she had been carried through the doors of her quarters. The Hound required no such dismissal, placing her down upon the couch and leaving immediately.

Gilly had curtsied clumsily before her, pleading to help Sam with the wounded and sick within and without. Dany had waved her away, insistent.

Missandei attended to her now, and Dany felt herself floating on a cloud of exhaustion and listlessness as her friend undressed her.

The woman knew better than to pelt her with questions, though Dany could clearly see them clearly burning behind her brown eyes. Dany did not know if she could ever properly express her gratitude to her, for keeping her silence, for allowing Dany to exist in the blankness for a time.

Missandei hissed in surprise as she unraveled the length of linen that wound around Dany’s injured thigh. She grabbed up a battered silver glass from the table next to her and held it to her leg, so Dany may see the mark properly.

Dany gasped, pulling the silver glass from Missandei’s hands, bending closer.

A seam of a dark, burnished gray ran from the top of her knee to the top of her pelvis. It was strangely misted-- an iridescent sheen that reminded her of mother of pearl, of pitch-slicked water. She ventured careful, shaking fingers to it. It felt smooth, but the surface was rippled and grooved like the silt of a riverbed and burned hot as an ember.

Missandei reached her hand towards it, seemingly against her will. She drew her hand back with a tiny, astonished gasp. “Your Grace…” she said. “It is burning hot.”

“You forget, my friend,” Dany said tonelessly. “I do not feel the fire.”

Missandei nodded, swallowing and leaning towards the mark once more. “How…” she shook her head, bewildered. “I’ve never seen anything like this before, Your Grace.”

“It is a mark of some strange magic that I dare not try to understand,” Dany explained. “All I know is that if not for Jon Snow, I would have bled out in that shack.”
“Thank the gods for that man,” Missandei said with a small smile. “It is strange though… it seems nearly healed. And in so short of time.” She stood and grasped her hands, helping her to lift herself from the couch.

They hobbled together to the bronze tub, steaming and looking as inviting as a feather bed to Dany in that moment. She suddenly felt every grain of dirt and smear of soot on her skin weigh on her like a stone. “Oh, thank the gods,” she muttered as Missandei helped her step in.

Dany leaned against the back of the tub with a blissful sigh, closing her eyes in delight.

She cracked them open again in slight confusion, searching for where her friend had gone. She had not heard her stir for a suspicious length. Missandei stood before her, looking at her chest with a curiously creased brow. “What are you doing?”

Missandei looked her in the eyes, her expression not changing in the least, not even slightly apologetic. “Forgive me, Your Grace, it’s just that…”

Dany sat up further in the tub, feeling her pulse pound in her ears as she resisted the urge to cover breasts with her arms. “What is it?”

“Well, your breasts, Your Grace,” Missandei answered, leaning forward to palm one—probing and clinical. “They seem… larger.”

Dany sat frozen within the water, knuckles going white over the lip of the tub to halt their shaking.

“Are they… more sensitive?” Missandei queried, undaunted by Dany’s silence.

“What of it?” Dany blurted, feeling inexplicably defensive.

Missandei paused, her eyes falling somewhat in sympathy. “You have been sick Your Grace.”

Dany dropped her hands into the water, looking at their strange reflection beneath the surface--
pale and bloated, corpse-like. She drew in a deep breath. “I know it.”

“Your Grace?”

Her eyes roved over the skin of her belly, taunting her with its unchanged slope and shape. She closed her eyes, imagining it swelling, growing taught, furrowed with streaks of pink like a fresh and fallow field.

She shook her head, not ready, unsure if she ever would be ready-- for good or ill. She was warring within herself-- to bring her secrets into the light of day, to let her most trusted friend look upon what dread thing had plagued her for an age… or to curl under her furs and sleep it away, until all the fell deeds were done, until her fears of it being a trick, some evil, short-lived ghost, a demon in her blood, melted away within the river of time.

“It is the change in diet, my friend,” she finally managed. “These Northerners eat rich.”

Missandei blinked at her, thoroughly unconvinced. “But you have not eaten much in days,” she ventured, looking her over worriedly. “Have you seen a maester?”

Dany forced herself to smile, looking back up at her friend. “Perhaps tomorrow,” she said, overly bright, words stilted with forced levity.

Missandei glanced away, biting her lip, but seemed to come to the conclusion that she would venture no farther with her on this matter… at least not today. She moved to gather the oils and other assorted potions that would see her cleaned and polished. Back to some semblance of normal.

Dany lifted her arms to the rest on the sides of the tub again, but halted with a wince and a hiss. She clutched her shoulder, looking down at the teardrop shaped bite in her shoulder, black and ugly.

“What is that?” Missandei asked softly.

Dany looked away from it, feeling a poisonous grief soak into her bones. She swallowed. “That, Missandei, is the blood of my son.”
Missandei’s shoulders fell under the weight of her sympathy. She brushed concerned fingers over the line of her jaw and Dany struggled with the tears that burned behind her eyes. “I am so sorry, Your Grace.”

Dany took in a shuddering breath, shaking her head. She stared unseeing at the far wall, where a Stark banner hung, dusty and moth-eaten.

She listened to Missandei’s quiet footfalls as she came stand behind her. Dany’s hair was still bound in cloth. Her friend untied the little knot at the top of her neck and Dany felt her hair tumble down upon her shoulders, tips falling into the water, splaying and swaying like anemones.

“This may take a while, Your Grace,” Missandei said worriedly as she brushed probing fingers over the mean knots and tangles of her hair.

“Don’t bother with it, my friend,” Dany said, voice clipped, a black and bitter anger swelling within her heart. “Do you have any shears?”

“Well… yes, Your Grace--”

“Then cut it.”

There was a stunned, ringing silence, the air growing taught and heavy. Dany remained still as stone, resolute in her grief. Slowly, Missandei stepped to stand beside her. Dany looked up at her, raising her eyebrows in question. “You want me to… cut your hair?”

Dany turned her face away again. “That is what I said, is it not?”

“Yes, but… Your Grace, it can be combed out--”

“I care not of tangles or mats, my friend,” Dany cut across her, attempting to keep her tone even, patient. “I deserve a braid no longer.”

“But Your Grace…” Missandei began, unsure. Dany bit back her angry reproach, swallowing the mean words despite her growing impatience. “You have just won a great victory, have you not?”
“I have,” she returned, voice queer and dark. She turned her eyes back to her friend, feeling her heart pound against her ribs. “But I also killed my child.” She looked away again, throat working, catching and stalling on all the perilous things locked within her. “There is no greater defeat than that, and I am fit to wear a braid no longer.”

“But your people,” Missandei replied, voice panicked, “The Dothraki--”

“They will come to learn in time, my friend.” She managed a tiny, wan smile. “I appreciate your concern for me, but this is what needs to be done.” She looked back up at her. “So, Missandei of Naath, fetch the shears.”

+++ Winterfell was fit to bursting.

Sansa had sent out as many men as she could find to lead the Lannister armies to some scrap of land that could serve as a camp. Jon knew that she had prepared as much as she could—pulling grain from stores all across the North, employing more blacksmiths to toil in the forges, recruiting woodcutters, carpenters and tanners to build walls for defense, shelters for the helpless. Refugees were streaming in by the score daily, fleeing hamlets and villages swallowed up by the slow tide of the Dead marching ever southward.

He could only hope that it was enough.

He shifted in his chair, anxious and impatient to get on with it. Sansa sat silently beside him and Arya was perched stiffly in the chair next to her, restless and agitated. Jon well understood his youngest sister’s wariness—playing court with a man that had been the source for so much misery-- but he wished she would settle, if only for the sake of his own frayed nerves.

Even the presence of Davos, Tyrion and Varys annoyed him, though they seemed to be in perfectly agreeable moods.

“Where is Bran?” Jon asked, looking around at the company assembled, concerned.
“He’s been holed up in the Godswood for nearly a week,” Sansa explained with a tired sigh, as though she was beyond worrying about it any longer. “He has asked not to be disturbed.”

“He hasn’t even emerged to eat?” Jon asked, bewildered, his ire already building.

“Gilly brings him food, though she says he barely touches it.”

He shook his head, troubled, but was prevented from saying anything further by the arrival of their guests.

Jon watched as Jaime strolled in, crimson armor gleaming in the bright winter sun that streamed through the windows. His crass lackey followed behind him, blue eyes roaming over the spare Great Hall with some amount of disappointment as he tucked his thumbs into his belt.

Jaime bowed lowly, while Bronn followed belatedly with a much lazier gesture. “Your Grace, my ladies, my lords,” Jaime began magnanimously, “what a pleasure it is to see you all again so soon. I thank you for your hospitality.”

Beside him Bronn let out a quiet snort and Jaime gave him a warning glare.

“Well met, my lords,” Jon said with a nod. “We feared the duplicitous nature of Queen Cersei may have won out.”

Something tightened around Jaime’s eyes. He tilted his head. “Yes, well, you know what they say of rumors.”

“Most prove to be seeded in truth,” Varys chimed with his eyebrows raised.

Jaime looked properly uncomfortable now. He licked his lips. “Well… we are here, and ready to join the fight for the living.”

A small smile drew itself over Jon’s lips, feeling heartened despite his foul mood. “It is a glad wonder to hear you say such things, Kingslayer,” he said. “I and the queen are most appreciative of your help.”
Jaime’s eyes flickered. “Forgive me, but where is the Dragon Queen? And her dragons, for that matter?”

“She was injured during battle. She is resting.” Jon replied flatly. “As to her dragons, I think that is hardly of any concern to you.”

Jaime shifted on his feet, trying to not seem perturbed by the rebuke. Jon felt a flash of satisfaction to see him squirm a bit. “I did see your triumphant return, Your Grace,” Jaime replied, a ghost of a bewildered grin floating on his lips. “But tell me, is the Night King vanquished? Have we journeyed so far only to join in the celebrations?”

Indeed, the racket the camps were making outside Winterfell’s walls could be heard even from where they now stood. Jon stared back at Jaime, suspicion clouding his eyes. He found himself caught…reflexively untrusting of the man before him, but now facing the very real prospect of having to treat him as a faithful ally. He found himself wishing for Daenerys, she was much better at all this than he was.

The silence stretched on, threatening to snap at any moment under the tension as the two men regarded one another with well-stoked wariness.

“For gods’ sakes,” Sansa muttered to herself before continuing more briskly. “One of the queen’s dragons was taken under the heel of the Night King, Lord Jaime,” Sansa explained. “My brother and the queen returned only hours ago from a successful mission to slay the beast.”


“A factor no more, my lord,” Jon said a bit loudly, throwing his sister an acid look over his shoulder.

“Thank the gods for that,” Jaime replied, looking truly relieved. Even Bronn looked mildly impressed. “I’ve seen firsthand what a dragon can do. What they’re capable of. And what nasty business it is to slay one—“ Jaime stopped, looking startled as if he had just stumbled into a tangle of poisonous thorns, swallowing the words back too late.

“Aye,” Jon nearly shouted, standing from his chair, the anger under his blood sparking anew. “You
and your companion there both tried to slay the queen and her son on the Blackwater Rush.”

“Aye, and we didn’t,” Bronn snapped. “It’s bloody war, King Snow, or whatever it is you’re going by now. What were we to do while she burned everything in sight? Have a cup of tea and talk things out?”

Jon stilled, his face falling, body locked in shock. He knew what a dragon could do-- the terror they could unleash. But he had only seen them breathe hell over hordes of his enemies, undead demons just when he thought all was lost and he was truly done for. He hadn’t fully considered what it would be like, to see them used to destroy the living. Men who had no hope of withstanding such an attack. It made him feel queer, something bitter and black rising within his throat in the wake of his aborted outrage.

Jaime held out a stilling hand to his companion, about to attempt to douse the fire that had suddenly sprung up between them, when Tyrion spoke.

“You must understand the king’s wariness, my lords,” he said as levelly as possible. “He and the queen both have suffered much in the past few days, and you can be sure that the weight of it is great.”

Jon’s shoulders fell, shifting back on his feet, throwing Tyrion a grateful glance.

“Lord Tyrion speaks truly, my lords,” Jon said, voice suddenly filled with all the exhaustion he carried in his bones. “I ask your forgiveness for being so… abrupt. You come here as friends, and you shall stay here as friends.”

Jaime nodded, managing a tight-lipped smile. “There is nothing to forgive, Your Grace.”

Jon settled back in his chair and folded his hands upon the table.

“I know that the hour is still early and you and your men have travelled far, but the queen’s Dothraki forces have fallen under the curse of a pox.” Jon shifted, feeling as grim as ever. “If it does not place unnecessary burden upon you, my lord, I should request that you order whatever healers and maesters you may have within your number to go forth into the Dothraki camp and aid the men and women I myself have already sent forth. The number that have fallen ill is great and we need every able person available to us.”
Jaime offered a shallow bow and Jon was glad to see that he looked almost... eager to grant this request. “Of course, Your Grace.”

Jon nodded, his eyes softening, looking pleased. “I am sorry to cut this meeting short, my lords, but I am weary from travel and I am afraid I cannot stomach much more talk. Please, make yourselves at home. My Hand, Ser Davos, will show you to your rooms.”

Jaime and Bronn bowed, turning and leaving the room, Davos following shortly behind.

Tyrion immediately turned in his chair when the doors closed and Jon held up a staying hand, closing his eyes. “Please, Lord Tyrion, I was not sparing our guests’ pride by exaggerating.”

Tyrion’s mouth snapped shut again and he nodded, looking disappointed but knowing.

Jon turned to leave as well, but Sansa snatched him by the wrist before he could even take a full step. “You may dismiss your advisors, but your sisters have something to discuss with you that cannot be delayed.”

Jon looked at her, worried. He sunk slowly back into his chair as Tyrion and Varys both filtered infuriatingly slowly from the room-- no doubt hoping to catch something of what they would be discussing.

Sansa looked over her shoulder at her younger sister, now sitting with her boots on the table and her arms crossed in front of her, a dark and thoroughly exasperated expression on her face.

“Arya and I have had some... troubling reports,” Sansa began with a long-suffering sigh.

“Reports?” Jon repeated, leaning forward to catch eyes with Arya, only to be thwarted by a sullen turn of her head.

“It seems that the Lord Varys received some information about certain... groups within the Stark bannermen who were dissatisfied by... well, by the recent developments concerning your alliance with the queen.”
Arya scoffed but said nothing. Jon looked between his two sisters, his brow crumpling and his face darkening, already drawing his own grim conclusion. “And?”

“And…” Sansa pressed on, looking to her gloved hands, “Lord Varys saw fit to supply this information to Arya.”

Jon paused for a long while as Arya remained wordless within her chair. “Varys gave this to… Arya,” Jon said, voice dangerously low, his pulse kicking up. “And what, sister, did you do with this… information?”

Arya looked over at him, face blank. “I took care of it.”

Jon cursed, slamming a fist upon the table. “How many?”

“Nine.” Arya sniffed, picking a stray thread from her trousers. “So far.”

Jon cursed again, lunging from his chair. “Why?” he yelled. “How could you do this?” He pointed to the window, hand shaking in barely-restrained wrath. “It has been fight after bloody fight out there for me, and now I have my own sister culling the herd like a rabid wolf? Do you know what they would do if they ever found out? Do you?”

Arya’s face wrinkled in outrage. “They were going to kill the bloody queen, Jon!” she snapped, bringing her feet off the table and sitting straighter in her chair. “What was I supposed to do? You left me behind to protect her!”

Jon breathed out, a bit stunned at this. She had a point, but Seven Hells… He stepped closer to her and he gripped her by the elbows. “If they found out, Arya, they’d come for your head.” He waved a hand behind him, indicating Sansa, who sat tense and numb amid the fury. “They’d come for your head, mine, Sansa’s. I am king here, Arya, and a king dispenses justice with trial and execution… not with catspaws and trickery.”

“I tried telling her that,” Sansa said with a sigh as Arya seemed to settle, if only a fraction. “We came to a compromise. She arrested Lord Glover instead of killing him”

Jon wheeled around to look at her, his eyes wide and shocked. “Arrested… Lord Glover?”
Sansa inclined her head. “That was one thing she did right, it seems.” She leaned forward and plucked a sheaf of parchment from the table in front of her, offering it to him. He took it hesitantly, reading it over slowly.

His shoulders slumped and he closed his eyes. “You are sure of this?”

Sansa nodded. “He as much as admitted it when he was delivered before me and Tyrion and Lord Varys the other night.”

Jon shook his head, leaning his palms on the table and crumpling the parchment in his fist. He hung his head and a long and troubled breath rattled out of him. “Bloody fool,” he muttered.

Sansa leaned forward, placing a soothing hand on his shoulder, tense as steel under her fingers. Beside him, Arya seemed to sag, the last of her indignation sapping away within his obvious strife.

She placed soft fingers on his other shoulder. “I don’t think you have to worry about any more traitors among the North,” she said quietly with a small, fond smile. “Not after the entrance you made this morning.”

Jon released something that might have been a laugh, his shoulders relaxing if only a bit. He lifted his head, pushing himself upright. He held out his arms expectantly and Arya and Sansa both moved in, twining around him and he felt his lungs fill, his muscles loosen.

They stayed like that for some time.

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“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Jaime rounded on him, shocked. “It’s nice to see you too, little brother.”

Tyrion rolled his eyes, leaning over to look at Bronn and Davos who had halted further down the
hall. “Mind if I borrow my idiot brother for a moment?” Bronn shrugged, turning to stride down the hall again, Davos following confusedly in his wake.

“Some guard you got there.”

Jaime threw up a shoulder. “He’s really more of a friendly growth.”

Tyrion nodded. “Apt,” he said, stepping aside and indicating the opposite direction. “Shall we?”

Tyrion led his brother down the hall, turning off into a storeroom that he had successfully claimed for himself as makeshift workroom. The shared quarters with Varys simply did not suffice, although it did have the very excellent luxury of a hearth. All Tyrion had managed was a rusted-out brazier that had long ago guttered.

Jaime walked in, looking around a bit bewildered at the windowless little cell that contained little else but a plank of wood spread across three barrels of pickled fish and a wickedly uncomfortable chair. It did contain a flagon of wine though, and Tyrion crossed over to the crate where it rested after he closed the door, pouring himself a cup.

“So, brother,” Jaime said as he sat on the edge of an obliging barrel. “What did I do wrong this time?”

“Where do I start?” Tyrion quipped as he smacked his lips. He strode over to his chair and settled down in it, leaning back as he pointed a finger at him. “I cannot protect you once the queen finds out that you lied to her closest ally.”

Jaime snorted, looking around the room as if Tyrion were playing some sort of childish joke on him. “I did not lie about a single thing.”

“An omission is still a lie, brother,” Tyrion nearly snarled, placing his wine down with a resounding ‘thunk’ on his desk. “Especially in politics.”

Jaime sighed, looking to the floor. “I know what you’re thinking, brother, but this is not the time to needlessly anger anyone.” He looked back up at him, throwing his hands out. “Sometimes a small deception is better than the truth, don’t you think? The fight is here. Not in King’s Landing.”
Tyrion scoffed, taking a healthy swig of his wine. “You have no idea what you’ve walked into.” He tapped a worried finger on his glass. “How did you get here with the whole Lannister army without our sweet sister putting your pretty head on a spike?”

Jaime shook his head. “You’ll have to ask Bronn.”

Tyrion’s eyebrows almost reached his hairline. “Bronn?”

Jaime nodded.

Tyrion blew out a slow, astonished breath as he shook his head. “Well… that is certainly an interesting revelation.” He leaned back in his chair with a sigh. “As fortuitous as this is, it doesn’t change the fact that Cersei has no intention of honoring her word.”

“So you know?” Jaime asked, astonished. Tyrion simply sipped his wine, choosing the silence to speak for him.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you,” Jaime said, leaning forward, arms on his knees. “What exactly did you say to our sister? You had to know it was all a deceit.” He laughed and shook his head. “I did not see it, but you’ve always been smarter than either of us.”

Tyrion sighed heavily, pursing his lips, considering what to say. It was a secret he had intended to take to his grave, but if he could not trust his own brother with such a burden… well. “I told her the truth,” he said with some finality. “I advised her the same way I advised my queen only a few weeks before. I told her to give Daenerys something by giving her nothing.” He tapped a knuckle upon the arm of his chair. “Which was her word.”

Jaime stared at him, entirely unconvinced. “You told our sister to give your queen her word which you knew to be worthless?” He barked out a laugh. “Forgive me, brother, if I cannot entirely follow.”

“Cersei is pregnant.” He said flatly and Jaime winced. “Pregnant women are fearful. And their fear makes them strong and weak at the same time.” He shifted forward in his chair, folding his hands in front of him. “I told her that her baby would never be safe with such an enemy at her door. The best enemy is a distracted one, after all.”
“So… you told her to agree to a truce, just so that Daenerys would... leave?”

Tyrion nodded. “You’ve heard me say it, brother, our sister may be a miserable cunt, but she has always loved her children.”

Jaime looked to the floor, crestfallen. “Perhaps a bit too much.” Tyrion regarded his brother, sympathetic, but chose to say nothing. Jaime heaved a great breath. “I still fail to see how this would get Cersei to fold as she did. She is not a fan of... compromise, false or otherwise.”

Tyrion lifted a shoulder, dismissive. “I told her Daenerys had no hope of winning.” Jaime looked up at him, stunned. “That the Night King had already stolen a dragon from her and that she was an uncontrollable demon, doomed to self-destruction. That she was one fool in love with another and was upon the path that all fools must take.” He sighed, taking a bracing sip of wine. “I asked her: why fight dragons, when the Night King could kill the dragons for her?”

Jaime squinted at him, disgusted and shocked in equal measure. “You really are a slimy bastard.”

Tyrion waggled a finger at him. “I only told her exactly what she wanted to hear.”

“And why the living fuck would she trust a single word that came from your mouth?” He threw up his hands, defeated. “Even I find it nearly impossible now.”

Tyrion shrugged, unworried. “She was scared,” he said softly. “As I said, the fear for a child’s life can do strange things to a person. You saw Daenerys drop her dainty feet upon the sand from the shoulder of a dragon as good as Cersei did.” Tyrion tilted his chin at him. “You were at Blackwater Rush, you saw what only a single dragon can do. Tell me, dear brother, how did you feel seeing such a creature bearing down upon you?”

Jaime paused, looking to the floor. “Fucking terrified,” he replied softly.

“Aye,” Tyrion answered, shifting in his chair. “And that is exactly what Cersei was feeling. A queen with two dragons and a fighting force that could break upon the walls of King’s Landing like water upon a stone.”
Jaime shook his head slowly, still at a loss. “I still… why flatter our sister so? The mortal enemy of your own queen?”

“But Cersei stands no hope of winning,” Tyrion replied mildly. “Let her have her jape. Once this war in the North is done and Daenerys flies South with such a legendary victory upon her shoulders, then we shall see what Cersei has wrought from her madness and her fear.” He leaned back in his chair, easy and assured. “When she comes for the throne, we will be negotiating surrender, not navigating a siege.”

Something in the way Jaime looked at him then made Tyrion’s heart simply halt within his chest. He sat up more fully in his seat. “Unless… you know something I don’t, dear brother?”

Jaime shifted his feet, looking to the ceiling as if hoping a great stone may appear and fall upon his head to knock him out. “Cersei intends to send Euron Greyjoy to Essos,” he finally replied heavily. “To ferry the Golden Company to King’s Landing.”

Tyrion felt his blood run cold. He stood from his chair, striding over to stand before his brother. “The fucking Golden Company?”

Jaime nodded, looking deeply uncomfortable, fully realizing what his ‘harmless deception’ may mean for him now.

Tyrion fumed, pulling at his hair. “They could be in King’s Landing as we speak, you bloody fool!” He paced, his mind whirling. “What exactly does she intend to do with this company?”

Jaime shook his head, helpless, looking to the floor.

Tyrion roared in frustration. “The next time you decide to do something noble, brother, kindly send a bloody raven.” He stepped closer to the other man, who had folded in on himself in dejection. “Where in the Seven Hells did she get the coin for that?”

Jaime simply blinked at him, looking ever more wretched, and Tyrion froze, the answer blowing him over like an angry bull. “You delivered that gold right into her greedy hands!” he snarled.

“I’m sorry brother,” Jaime pleaded, “I— I didn’t know—“
“You didn’t know that our sister was a bloodthirsty cunt?” he raved. “You’ve as good as signed her fucking death sentence, you fool. Her and your child.”

Jaime prickled at this, indignant. “You’re the one advising a queen who wants to kill her!”

“Cersei was supposed to be alone and friendless when Daenerys came for the city. She was supposed to be terrified and desperate and instead you’ve given her every reason to think she has a chance of keeping that bloody throne.” Tyrion stopped, giving his brother a withering glare. “Say what you will about Daenerys Stormborn, but she would never kill a woman with child.” Tyrion began his pacing anew. “But now you can be sure that all hope of saving your own child’s life is as dead as a stone, you bloody fool!”

Jaime blanched, looking to the floor, despair settling its mighty weight upon him now. “What do I do?”

“You request audience with Jon Snow first fucking light tomorrow. You tell him everything you told me… and hope Daenerys is still too exhausted to treat with fools.” He released a slow, steadying breath, closing his eyes. “And that nothing happens between now and then.”

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She stood before her cluttered desk, running her fingers through her hair, eyes glazed and unseeing.

Missandei had carried the braid away, to do what with, Dany did not know nor much care. She floated her fingers over the fresh-shorn ends. She felt immeasurably lighter, the hair slippery and free between her knuckles. She felt a bit alien, a bit queer. She had never known herself with short hair. She was not so sure what to think of it just yet.

She turned at the soft knock at the door, knowing that he did not need beckoning in order to enter.

He stepped through and found her with his eyes almost immediately, standing straight and strong in front of her desk, dressed in her finest riding leathers.

His eyes went wide as he shut the door slowly behind him. He strode forward, stopping a few steps
from her, taking her in. “Daenerys,” he rasped.

He closed the gap between them and his fingers were in her hair, raking through the short strands like a wind through wheat. His eyes looked impossibly sad, his head swaying to and fro in disbelief.

She had not fully considered Jon’s reaction to such a drastic change. She had only known that she could bear the weight of a heavy braid no longer. Thoughts of Jon’s… preferences had not once entered her mind until now. She felt herself steel, trying to tamp down the howling insecurity that suddenly bubbled up in her belly. He was her lover, her partner. He wanted her scarred and scraped as she was—a haircut should be no matter.

She breathed out, shaky but determined, ready to explain it away, building up defenses, when he spoke.

“I’m so sorry,” he croaked, bringing his brow to her own. “I’m so sorry that it’s come to this.”

She froze, stunned. She ventured careful fingers over the nape of his neck. “It had to be done,” she finally whispered.

He nodded, burrowing his face in her neck and winding his arms around her middle. He released a hot, ragged breath. “You’ll never have to do it again,” he said, muffled, against the skin of her neck.

She bit her lip against a wild, joyous sound that threatened to burst from her. What had she done for the gods to see fit to deliver this man to her? How could she ever hope to deserve such a gift?

She leaned away from him, placing her bandaged palms on either side of his beloved face. “How does it look? Missandei snipped for an age it seemed.”

He ran another hand through her hair, a hopeless and fond smile twitching on his lips. His fingers twirled around a strand and he tugged, just a bit. “Missandei must be a witch, for it looks like it has always been this way,” he finally answered, his eyes dark and questing. “And so soft.”

She grinned. “It will be nice to not have to spend hours of the day pinning and unpinning my hair.”
He returned her grin, something wicked glinting in his eyes. “Aye,” he murmured, “leaves time for other things.” His eyes dipped to the hollow of her throat and she felt herself flush.

“We have things to do, Your Grace,” she protested half-heartedly. Her arms came up to twist around his shoulders. “Besides, I am still in disrepair.”

“There are ways around that.” His voice was a mere rumble in his throat and such a wanton thrill shot through her she felt herself sway. It had been so long… so long since they had taken each other to bed, since they had properly undone each other with hands and lips and teeth.

She inched forward, lips hovering over his own. His breath beat out a staccato rhythm on her chin. “Make it quick, my king, we haven’t much time.”

He needed no more prompting, catching her lips in his own in a kiss that felt invasive, possessing her every nerve.

He clutched her by the hips, drawing her closer to his own, sealing the core of her along the length of heat that had grown beneath his leathers. She moaned into his mouth and he swallowed it up hungrily, stepping forward.

The edge of the desk pressed into the small of her back and she gave a little yelp of surprise. His palms tracked down, sliding over her ass to the back of her thighs, and pushed upwards. Before she properly understood what was going on, she was seated on the surface of the table, scattering parchment and quills.

He struggled with the lacings of her trousers and she hurried to help him until the seam could be shoved aside, the waist pushed down. She shimmied as he dragged the soft doeskin down the length of her dangling legs and then stopped.

He traced the pads of his fingers down the length of her dark, ragged scar, his eyes following the trail as if he were visiting an ancient and holy relic-- an artifact of profound beauty and horror all at once. “Daenerys…” he whispered through his kiss swollen lips, his blown pupils coming to focus, fog lifting.

She looked at him, a strange and furious fire burning behind her heart. “A part of you,” she said, voice husky and dangerous, fingers tightening over the lip of the table. “Now with me for the rest
of my days.”

He took in a great, ragged breath and dropped to his knees, dragging wet lips over the line of liquid metal. He lifted his head, lunging forward, nipping the top of her thigh so hard she gasped, hands diving into his hair.

He pulled away, rebellious, yanking her boots off roughly, shucking the last of her trousers from her feet. He straightened, coming towards her and she craned her neck to taste his mouth again but he had other ideas, reaching behind her, shoving inkwell and wax and all sundry over the other end of the desk and it all came clattering to the floor.

She felt words of protest well up in her throat, but they crumbled to ash in her mouth when he kissed her again. She tasted something desperate in his breath, something weighty and powerful struggling within him.

He tore his mouth away, panting and flushed, and gently edged her down onto the desk. She went both willingly and reluctantly at once—missing the flavor of him, but addled and helpless with lust.

She heard him settle between her thighs, a slow draw of breath, and then a rumble that could only be described as a growl. Callused fingers twined around the bones of her ankles and her feet were lifted, braced on his shoulders.

She cried out, pressing the meat of her hand between her teeth as she felt him take an exploratory swipe at her with his clever tongue.

His hands slid over the lines of her shins, over her knees and down her thighs. They came to rest over the crease of her pelvis and his fingers dug in, the pressure delicious, colliding with the marks of pleasure he was etching into her skin.

She lifted her hips in helpless torment, pain twinging in her shoulder, her heels dug into his clavicle. She felt a puff of air against her and distantly realized that he was laughing.

Before she could kick him away in a fit of outrage, his palms slid to her bottom, clutching greedily, and yanked her forward. She shouted a wordless protest, before flinging her head back with a ‘thunk’ upon the table.
He buried his face between her legs, slurping her down like she was a newfound spring within miles and miles of desert. Her fingernails scraped into the wood, desperate for purchase, something to hold onto as she rapidly spun toward oblivion.

A broken cry of his name managed to escape her collapsing lungs before she bit down hard on her lip. She heard him positively purr, the vibrations flowing straight into her core like a current and she could take it no longer. Her back pulled taut, mouth open in some soundless shout, her legs coming to wrap around his head, her ankles catching behind his shoulders. His tongue delved, writing glyphs to a blissful unmaking right into some dark, untapped part of herself she had hidden away long ago.

He rode her through it, hands coming around to press into the small of her back, holding her up as she shook like a saplinging in a gale.

“Fuck,” she breathed as she slowly fell back into herself. “Fuck, Jon…”

The hands on her lower back pushed, placing her more securely on the desk before he stood, swiping a hand over his wet chin. He leaned over her, smiling in a proud, sweet sort of way and she didn’t have the heart to chide him for taking her apart so thoroughly.

She squirmed against him, the hot ridge of his hardness pressing against her. “You’ve forgotten to take those damned trousers off, Jon Snow.”

He laughed quietly, and latched his teeth deep into the meat of her shoulder. She hissed, throwing her head back again, undulating like a viper beneath him. His hand roamed up the front of her, fingers curling over the opening of her leather shirt, pulling until the fastenings came free and her breasts spilled out into the cold air and into his waiting palms. She clawed at his hauberk, flipping the hooks open with an impatient growl and shoving it off him.

Their mouths crashed together and Dany felt oddly alien, a creature of heat and light, relishing the scrape of his bare chest against her own after he managed to rip himself away to throw his shirt off. She wished, viciously, that her hands were not bandaged, that the skin of her palms could drink in the warmth of him, could gather it beneath her veins like brimstone to simmer there forever.

His tongue laved over her nipples, and she almost cursed in anguish, ready to feel him inside her, to fill this aching void within her before she went mad with it.
She didn’t entirely know when or how, but he had got his trousers off, and she felt him probe at her entrance, his hips lashing against her, dragging his hot length torturously over the seam of her. She whimpered, rutting shamelessly.

He leaned away from her, eyes dangerous, chest heaving and she nearly gasped at the sight of him—beard a tangle, hair mussed, sweat gleaming in the hollow of his throat.

He took her hands, resting at his hips, and captured both her wrists between a forefinger and thumb and lifted them, pressing them behind her ears. He took hold of himself with his other hand and drove into her with one, sudden twitch and she screamed.

He leaned over her, driving himself into her hard and fast, going for her throat again with his hot mouth. She thrashed against him, hands desperate for a taste of him, the pain in her shoulder reaching a breaking point that only seemed to meld into the fiery threads of bliss coursing through her—forming some new and rare alloy that burned into her like a brand.

He leaned away from her again, pulling her ass more fully off the desk, releasing her hands to get a good grip on her. He gathered both her ankles into his hand and tossed them over a shoulder. She gasped at the new angle, tightening her hold on him, the drag of his length now almost painful, sinful and indulgent. She writhed, trying her best to meet every thrust, hungry for every single inch of him.

She felt that ragged edge build within her again, scraping cruelly against the most sensitive parts of herself. He was too far from her to properly reach and she moaned in protest, settling for curling her hands over the edge of the table, throwing her head back and taking it, helpless.

She was almost cleanly launched from the desk when she felt his thumb press against her, when she heard his noisy grunt as her walls clenched against him, as she felt him twitch and spill within her.

There was a moment where she felt fully out of herself, floating somewhere just above her slippery skin, her heaving chest.

He collapsed over her, pressing warm, loving kisses over her collar bone, up the column of her neck, over the line of her jaw. They kissed, laguid and lazy, for some time, trying to find an anchor to hold them to the earth.
“Alright?” he finally managed through his heavy breaths.

She nodded against him, twisting her arms around him, holding him close so she may revel in the pace of his heart.

“I don’t know how I will ever ride a horse now.”

Jon released a breathy laugh against her chest. He straightened, helping her to find her feet upon the floor. She wobbled, feeling limp and useless. “Would it help to say I was sorry, my queen?”

“No,” she replied, “for I know you wouldn’t mean it.” She bent shakily, using him as a crutch, to gather her trousers from the floor.

He smiled at her, running his fingers through her hair again, eyes trapped and fascinated. She felt something clench in her chest. “You really do like it, don’t you?”

He bent, pulling his pants back up around his hips, making his way to the wash basin. “Yes,” he said, voice rough and wrecked. He plucked a cloth from the neatly folded pile and dipped it into the dish of water. He shuffled back over to her, holding it out in offering. She took it with a fond grin and wiped away the mess he had left between her thighs.

“You look… free.” He ducked his head, looking to catch her eyes, something of a sheepish grin taking over his features. “I know that sounds... stupid.”

She shook her head, grasping his hand and dragging his palm to her mouth, at a loss for any words that could properly express her gratitude.

They went about straightening themselves, pulling on discarded clothing and adjusting various fastenings and buckles.

“Are you feeling better?” he asked suddenly as he redid the hook-and-eyes of his hauberk. “I know you were sick this morning… though you tried to hide it.”

She felt herself go cold, all the effusive warmth that buzzed through every nerve now banished like
She had been careful that morning when they had broken camp to go as far away as possible, to quash her groans and coughs and return quickly, face clean and eyes clear. She should have known better, to keep such a thing from him.

She suddenly felt that she would be sick again, frozen in dread.

“I feel much better,” she replied weakly, knowing it was foolish to deny that she had been sick at all. “I think I had some off jerky.”

Jon nodded, something unconvinced and oddly hurt in his eyes before he looked away. “Queens are probably unused to camp rations.”

She smiled wickedly at him, latching on the distraction to her dark doubts. “You are wrong in that, Jon Snow,” she said, running an easy comb through her hair. “I have known the rankest and barest of rations during my time in the Red Waste.”

He shook his head, something of a dumb-struck smile ghosting his lips. “Should have known better than to doubt you.”

She laughed quietly, plucking her black cloak that she had retrieved from Mole’s Town from the peg on the wall. Jon took it from her, helping her to toss it about her shoulders. “How did the audience with the Kingslayer go?”

“Well enough,” he replied gruffly, smoothing his hands over her shoulders.

She turned and placed a hand on his chest, quirking her brow at him knowingly. “You weren’t mean to him were you?”

He blinked in surprise. “Mean?” he asked, a bit indignant. “Why would I be *mean* to him?” He huffed, defeated under her suspicious glare. “I might’ve lost my temper… *once*, but it’s fine. He is here with 20,000 men and is willing to help us.”

“Good,” she said, pleased. “Shall we be going then?”
She was halted in her progress to the door by his hand on her wrist. “There’s more.”

She felt her previous good spirits flee from her as good as a startled bird. “More?”

He looked up at her through his lashes. “Lord Glover is to be executed tomorrow,” he said heavily. “For treason and conspiracy to murder you.”

She tensed, anger flashing through her like a thunderbolt. He seemed to have perceived it within her for he stepped closer to her, placing a soothing hand on her shoulder. “He is my bannerman—”

“If he has admitted to wanting to kill me, let my face be the last thing he sees before he dies.”

Jon shook his head. “Your Grace,” he pleaded, taking on a formal tone of a supplicant. “As I said he is my bannerman and you are my ally. I must be the one to swing the sword.”

“Didn’t your brother-- the Young Wolf was it? Did he not execute a lord for treachery?” Jon’s face pulled taught with pain. He nodded. “And did he not suffer cruelly for such a choice?” Jon looked away, frustration taking hold as he shook his head, irritated. “I will not have you suffer the same fate.”

Jon heaved a mighty sigh. “There is nothing else for it, Daenerys,” he said defeatedly. “He must be killed, but the second you sentence the death of a Northerner-- all the good will we just won will be for naught.” He ran a thumb over her cheek, a small, adoring smile pulling at his lips. “Trust me in this, my love.”

She felt her fiery resolve break as good as glass against the earnestness in his words. She huffed out a resigned breath, nodding, distantly wondering how they would ever get anything accomplished if he was able to break her down with just a few words-- one word in particular.

“Fine,” she replied emphatically “But I shall be there when you do it.”

Jon nodded. “As you wish.”

She let out a large, cleansing breath. “Now, shall we be going?”
Davos strolled through the bustling yard of Winterfell. He had shown Bronn to his quarters… well to his and Jaime’s quarters. Bronn had looked thoroughly unimpressed, turning on his heel after a dispirited sweep of the room with a muttered “time to find a girl”.

The sounds of celebration could still be heard through the endless toil and work that filled the walls of Winterfell. Barrels upon barrels of pitch were being hoisted with rope and pulley to the top of the battlements—Jon had warned that the Dead were deft climbers. The sound of axes milling tree trunks for palisades, the clang of hammer on metal, the whine of mules and wagons all sounded upon the backdrop of song and drums in the distance.

“Still toiling away?” Davos called as he approached the forge, his feet taking him there seemingly outside his awareness. “After being the first bastard to forge Valyrian steel in a thousand years, I thought you’d perhaps allow yourself a rest.”

Gendry looked up from his hammering and smiled. “I knew you to be funny, my lord,” he greeted as he wiped his sweaty brow with grimy rag he pulled from his belt. “Not ridiculous.”

Davos nodded as he came to a stop beside him. “Aye, well, sometimes the two go hand in hand.” He looked over the curved plate of metal the man clutched within his blacksmith’s tongs. “What in the Seven Hells are you up to now?”

“Armor for the queen,” Gendry answered with a shrug. “Jon Snow came here not two hours ago and requested I get started right away.”

Davos smiled at that, clapping Gendry on the shoulder proudly. “It best be light. Our queen cannot bear full plate.”

Gendry nodded. “I’ve tasked an apprentice with the chainmail. His Grace was specific—no full plate except about the shoulders and legs.”

Davos opened his mouth to respond but was interrupted. “Ser Davos!” He turned his head to see the lords Tyrion and Varys standing amid the catwalk. “A moment, if you will.”
Davos turned back to Gendry with an exasperated look and a nod. Gendry bid him farewell and Davos ventured up to the two men, trying his best not to be annoyed. “My lords?”

“Forgive us, Ser Davos, for intruding,” Tyrion said with a gracious bow, “but we wanted to speak with you about the battle at Castle Black. We are most… curious about it.”

“I would suppose so,” Davos answered tiredly. “Though, I should think that all you needed to know would be in the songs.”

As if to illustrate his point, a raucous chorus broke out among a knot of passing Mormont men from below.

“Yes, well,” Tyrion said with a cold smile, “we all know how... embellished songs can be.”

Davos sighed, resigned to his fate. “Shall we adjourn to my rooms, my lords?”

A few moments later, Davos was peeling off his gloves and laying them on his desk, watching as Lord Varys and Lord Tyrion examined his quarters, attempting not to show their clear envy. “A drink, my lords?” he asked as he poured himself an ale. Both shook their heads, more partial to wine.

“Please,” Davos said, indicating the chairs before the fire. “Sit, my lords.”

They all settled in and Tyrion leaned forward, rubbing his hands together. “What happened, Ser Davos?”

Davos barked a laugh at that, scratching his chin. “What happened?” he asked in astonishment. “The queen bloody well killed a dragon, that’s what happened.”

Tyrion leaned back in his chair, flustered. “Yes, well, we know that.”

“I think what my friend here is trying to say is what happened to our queen and your king?” Varys supplied mildly. “Their entrance this morning was most… vexing.”
“Vexing?” Davos inquired.

Tyrion shifted, pursing his lips. “Well, to start, the queen was cradled between the king’s arms. Presumably stark naked under the king’s own cloak. That… is a strong image.”

Davos leaned back more fully in his chair, letting out a wholly contented breath. “I suppose it is.”

Tyrion looked at him sourly. “We must consider what message this sends to the people.” The man stood, pacing. “The queen is in possession of her own cloak… I saw it delivered to her by Brienne only this morning, before she shooed me out. Why choose the king’s cloak? You are aware of the significance of cloaks in our culture, are you not?”

Davos pursed his lips at him, deciding silence was a better option, or else he’d end up saying something he’d regret.

“And whose idea was it to bring the dragon’s head?” Varys ventured, more calm than his counterpart. “It seems to both of us that this whole display was meticulously orchestrated.”

“It was the king’s decision,” Davos answered finally.

Tyrion halted in his pacing, looking at him curiously. “I’m sure the queen was not happy about that.”

Davos shook his head, taking another sip of ale. “Oh, no, my lords, they fought bitterly about it for some length.”

“Well, fuck me,” Tyrion said, a bit breathless. “That’s... surprising.” He shook his head, determined to be a miserable bastard about it. “Still, though, it was a bold move, riding in as they did. The message--”

Davos waved to the window behind him. “Shall I open the window, my lord, or have you already heard the message that our king and queen have sent?”
Tyrion squinted at him suspiciously. “Our king and queen?”

Davos lifted the horn of his ale, pointing a finger at them. “Oh, have you not heard?” he asked, chipper, taking a swig from his cup. “They married not a few days ago.”

The color drained from both men’s faces as quick as if they had been stuck with a lance. “Married?” Varys blurted as Tyrion nearly shouted, “You can’t be serious!”

Davos smiled tightly. “I’m afraid I am perfectly serious, my lords,” he said lifting his horn again. “Long live the king and queen.”

Tyrion began his furious pacing anew. “This is preposterous,” he announced. “They cannot marry without… well without counsel!”

Davos lifted his eyebrows at that, pointing a cautioning finger at him. “You are mistaken, my lord. They are monarchs, you know. They can do as they please.”

Tyrion stopped to give him a withering glare. “They’ve been betrothed far longer than you know, Ser, so my question is why? Why now? Why the secrecy?”

“You said it yourself, my lord,” Davos answered dryly, “That they don’t seem to be keeping it much of a secret.” He stood, crossing over to the fire to poke it back into proper life. “As to your first question, both Jon and Daenerys—especially Daenerys—came very close to death at Castle Black. That can stir even the stoutest hearts to do mad things.”

Tyrion stepped closer to him, looking relieved. “So you agree?” he asked. “It is madness?”

Davos frowned at him. “I feel sorry for you, my lord, to think such a thing as madness.” He took up his chair again and silence reigned for a time.

“How did they marry?” Varys inquired, seemingly less perturbed about the news than his companion. “I mean to say… did they recite their vows upon a battlefield, while on the back of a horse? With their march back south, I hardly think there would be time for such a thing.”
Davos paused, thinking it over. “Edd Tollett, Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch— he found a weirwood, I believe it is called, among the woods near Mole’s Town. He wanted a place for his more… old-fashioned brothers to pray, to mourn their dead friends.” He sighed and took another sip of his ale. “See, weddings are extraordinarily brief, if one does not draw it out with frilly ceremony and drink and dancing.”

Tyrion shook his head, seemingly holding onto his composure by a thread. “And you allowed this farce?”

Davos barked out a laugh. “I was the one who administered the farce, my lord.”

Tyrion rounded on him, eyes flashing. “You are the king’s Hand!” he shouted, outraged. “How could you allow such foolishness to abide?”

“Foolishness?” Davos snapped, sitting up in his chair, anger flushing through him. “You call what those two have foolishness?” He shook his head, standing and walking to his desk, placing his horn down. “I will not hear such blathering. I was just beginning to like you Lord Tyrion.”

A thick and tense silence filled the room like a noxious fume before Varys broke it. “Perhaps Ser Davos is correct, my lord,” he said gently, looking over at Tyrion. “Perhaps we should not be so hasty to judge. After all, it seems that the ceremony was secret. What does it matter, now?” Varys shrugged, looking wholly unconcerned. “Besides, you’ve told me yourself of how ardently you would approve of such a match.”

“Yes, but not like this,” Tyrion said hopelessly, clutching his hair. “What are we to do if a Northern lord approaches the king with a marriage proposal? What if the queen turns up pregnant?”

“Daenerys can’t have children,” Varys replied mildly. “As for your first concern, that is unlikely to happen at this juncture, at the threshold of war.”

Tyrion scoffed. “You underestimate the thirst and ambition of old men with unmarried daughters, my lord.”

“Whatever the case may be,” Davos pressed, “the king and queen were joined before a weirwood, bound with a ribbon fashioned for them by the king’s own sister. It is done, and whatever we do now cannot change it.”
Silence reigned again, Tyrion seeming to come to a reluctant rest amid the storm of his thoughts. “I am… sorry,” the man finally said heavily, looking forlorn. “I do wish for their happiness. I just wish…”

“That you would have been there?” Davos asked with a tiny, sad smile.

Tyrion looked to the floor, flustered. “Tell me, ser Davos,” he said quietly. “How did my queen look?”

Davos smiled fully at that, stepping closer to him. “Like a woman marrying the only man she ever wanted.”

Tyrion nodded, his eyes shining, a small, joyful smile managing to fight itself onto his face. “Good,” he said brokenly. “Lord Varys, I think we have pestered Ser Davos for long enough.”

Both men bowed, leaving the room without another word.

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“Khaleesi,” they called her, reaching for her, brushing fingers over her arms and palms, grabbing the hem of her shirt, the tail of her inky cloak, between forefinger and thumb. Some floated hands over her new-shorn hair, tears in their dark eyes, shaking their heads in grief.

They called after him too, as he walked behind her with the horses. “Khal,” they whispered. He did not know what it meant, but he could take a good guess.

He watched as she marched proudly through the throng that had gathered about her, arms spread, head tall, her limp barely noticable. He had been in love with her for ages now, it seemed, but he felt like he was falling anew, slipping into an ever-deepening pool, and he did not know if he would ever touch the bottom.

He looked over as a man brushed an ungloved hand over his arm. He stopped, looking to the ground, stunned.
They too are my people now, he thought with a small thrill of terror.

He pulled his gloves off his hands, handing them over to the man. He looked at him, nodding and thankful. Jon felt little comfort-- the man had not nearly enough furs for the cold.

And so it went. They walked through the entire length and breadth of the camp. The smell nearly sickened him and the sounds—wracking coughs and moans of pain—dug into his heart like thorns.

It was slow going, as Daenerys bent over sickly warriors and placed cooling fingers on their brows, her mere presence as soothing as a balm. She walked slowly, allowing all her subjects to see her, to witness her shame even as they reached out in wonder, or fell to their knees in sadness.

He noticed that those who cried out to did not do so in anguish, disgusted that their khaleesi had lost the long braid that mapped her victories in every strand. No, they wept for her son, for the tragedy hidden within her glory.

Jon walked behind, trying to take it all in, to help where he could with the food and water they had brought in the cart that Brienne was driving through the rutted trails, trying to wrangle how he, exactly, had convinced this woman to marry him.

He slowed whenever he caught sight of a Westerosi, crouched by a patient, feeding them barley broth or rubbing a salve on a sore chest. He thanked them quietly, giving them a cup a water, a paltry reward for their labor.

Daenerys halted in what seemed to be the busiest junction of the camp and turned to look at him for the first time since they arrived, and tilted her chin. He came forward, helping her onto the crates she stood before.

"Anna chomak, jadat, yeri khalessi eth astat tat yer!" she shouted. Jon looked up at her, astounded again and again as she spoke in her people’s strange tongue, her eyes flashing with love and passion, her cheeks red from the cold.

Warriors gathered around her, as enchanted as he, though he did not understand the words. They sounded fierce and protective, full of promise and fire. She touched her hair, miming pulling off a braid and flinging it away. She slashed with her hands and stomped her foot and when she gave
him her hand to join her on the crates he was so fucking addled by her he didn’t notice at first.

He felt his insides leave him as he grasped her wrist, pulling himself up onto the crates beside her. The air was thick with a deafening hollering and he did not know what to do except nod dumbly and attempt to gather this unearned adoration behind his hammering heart. She turned to beam at him, proud beyond reckoning, and his knees nearly gave out on him.

They descended the platform of crates, Jon helping her with shaking hands, stunned by what had just transpired. He brought the horses forward and helped hoist her onto the back of her gray mare, the saddle left behind in the light of her still sore leg.

He mounted up beside her on his black gelding and she shouted some more unfamiliar words, though they were clearly meant as words of farewell and reassurance.

The crowd pressed around them, milling, adoring, reaching rough hands to them. He looked over at her, searching for guidance. She nodded at him, a small, satisfied smirk on her lips. She leaned forward. “They seek the blessing of their khal.”

A heady mix of dread and excitement coursed through him and he reached down, touching every hand he could conceivably reach as they slowly picked through the crowd.

For ages, it seemed, they walked their horses through the camp, back to the castle. Brienne had unhitched the cart, riding the horse that had hauled it bareback. Some even reached to her and she blushed, uncomfortable under such impassioned scrutiny.

Finally, they made it to the edge of the tents and Jon felt his shoulders slump in relief. He looked over at Daenerys, who was smiling at him, looking more alive than he had ever seen her. Daenerys the khaleesi, the woman who had emptied the Dothraki Sea a world away. He let out an amazed laugh.

She reached for him, brazen, and leaned her lips against his ear. “There is something I must tell you.” Something in her voice made him shiver.

But before she could reveal whatever secret she held within her, Tyrion strode out to meet them, looking somber.
“Your Graces,” he greeted with a bow. He held out a scroll towards Daenerys, the unfamiliar black seal already broken. “A raven from Dragonstone.”

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Chapter End Notes

There is A LOT going on in this chapter. Sorry? I think?

Yeah, they got married off-screen. I just couldn't bring myself to write it and have it contribute anything new/important/exciting to the story. Sorry. Please don't hate me!

I'll fully admit that the smut is basically all for Our Queen in Filth, the amazing meisie.

As always, without hardlyfata, this yarn would be a incoherent mess. Thanks for keeping me honest dear.

Thank you all to the discerning tarts for being the supportive, patient, hilarious angels they are. (Sparkles59, ashleyfanfic, meisie, NoOrdinaryLines and jaqktd)

And, of course, thank you to all my fantastic readers. Without you and your support and your amazing words of encouragement, this likely would've petered out a long time ago.

On that note, please vote for this story and all your other favs for the 2017 Jonerys Fanfic Awards! Please give a bit back to all those awesome authors that give us so much!

(And YAY! 100,000 WORDS!!)

PS: HOLY SHIT LOOK AT THE MOOD BOARD ASHLEYFANFIC MADE FOR ME!!!!! SO EXCITED I'M GONNA HANG IT ON MY WALL!
Hardly Seen, Hardly Felt

Chapter Summary

After the trial of Jaime Lannister, after her arduous talk with Tyrion, she had holed herself away in her room, bent over a chamberpot, hands shaky, chest heaving. She had pressed her sore shoulders to the cold stone of the wall, her mind whirling and inconsolable, cursing all those gods she did not believe in.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Always thought you were a crazy fucker,” Euron quipped from his seat at the long, high table. “Never thought you’d be this crazy though.” He took a hefty bite of boar, chewing with a mad grin before wiping his mouth with the Targaryen banner laid in his lap. “Suppose it runs in the family.”

“I only speak the truth,” Theon insisted, “The queen wishes an audience.”

Euron laughed, spittle flying, as he pointed his fork at him. “Yes, you’ve said that before.”

Theon shivered, still drenched from the icy rain that lashed and howled outside the walls. Euron had sent some mad bastards out in a ship shortly after Theon and his crew had spotted the red smear of Dragonstone on the horizon. They had swamped his tiny ship and his tired men more easily than Theon cared to admit. He did not know what had become of his crew when they finally made it to shore. He had been soundly beaten and dragged before his uncle like some lowly raider.

Theon watched as blood from his busted lip dripped onto the stone in front of him, turning black upon the dusty floor, beaded and wet and glittering. He dragged a knuckle over his nose, his hand coming away smeared and red. “Where is my sister?” he asked abruptly, a sudden snap of desperate anger overtaking him, injured both in body and pride.

Euron guffawed, looking to his companions as if he couldn’t quite believe what he was asking. The gathered men all laughed dutifully. “Well she’s walking the camps,” he said with squinted eyes, baffled, as if it were obvious. “Entertaining the men. They’ve had a rough go of it and they need to know that their king is a generous one.” He spread his palms and leaned back in his chair, immeasurably pleased with himself.
Theon felt his stomach turn over and he bent forward, pressing his palms to his knees to keep himself from being sick.

Euron laughed again. “It’s the best place for her, nephew,” he said, his tone almost reassuring. “She will be well paid.”

Theon tasted the bile in his throat, felt the blood surge through his body, but he bit his lip hard, swallowing back the call for violence that sung through him. He was well-versed in submission, after all. “Perhaps you’re right,” he gritted out, straightening. “She’s always been a bit of a whore.”

Euron’s eyes lit up, surprised and satisfied. “Aye,” he cried, “Now you got it, don’t you nephew?”

Theon nodded. “Aye, uncle.”

Euron took another huge bite of boar. “So, tell me, nephew… what is this about an audience with the dragon bitch?”

Theon took a great breath, closing his eyes as he considered carefully, swiftly.

He had shouted to the men that had dragged him ashore that he had been sent by Daenerys Targaryen, that she had urgent business with “the future king of Westeros”. As such, the men of his uncle’s fleet had thrown him here, before the feet of Euron, drunk and happy with his conquest and Theon had not properly thought of what deception he would feed his uncle.

“First, I must know… have you killed everyone upon the island?” Theon asked.

“I might be a mad fucker, Theon, but I’m not an idiot,” Euron answered, taking a huge gulp of wine. “Those who did fight died like swine, but those who surrendered… well, they may live out the night if you’ve come here to tell me the Dragon bitch is ready to surrender.” He continued, tucking into his boar.

“The queen will be most thankful, hearing of your mercy, Euron,” Theon said with what he hoped was an ingratiating smile. He had to dig, painfully, back into his days of flattery and illusion in Winterfell, under the heel of a lunatic. Had to tap into those dark hours of his life, when he’d been Reek, curled in the cold kennels like a dog, licking the boots of his tormentor.
“Oh?” Euron questioned, wiping his mouth again with the dragon banner. “And why’s that?”

Theon took a great breath, standing straighter. He had to make it look genuine. “Queen Daenerys has sent me here to beg for your hand in marriage, my lord.”

Euron stopped chewing at that, raising his eyebrows. “Is that right?” he asked, looking to the other men assembled at the table with him. He suddenly broke into loud, raucous laughter, his companions following suit. “Does she wish to give me her armies and dragons and well? Perhaps a few gold dragons for the trouble?”

Theon looked back to the stone floor, gathering his thoughts. “The queen has seen the might of your fleet, my lord. She has felt the shame of defeat under your black sails.” He looked back up at his uncle with as much courage as he could muster. “She sees much advantage in marrying you.”

Euron stared at him for what seemed an age, pale eyes glinting like wildfire. Theon had to resist squirming, the heat of his gaze almost too much to bare. After a long moment, Euron stood, walking around the table and stepping down to come to stand before him. “You mean to tell me that the Dragon Queen wants to marry me? The ally and betrothed of her sworn enemy?”

Theon nodded, eyes falling to the floor, a bubble of hopeless anxiety welling in his throat. “You are the only eligible bachelor left in the Seven Kingdoms, my lord. And by marrying you, the queen would have an undefeatable force. The Iron Throne would be hers… and by rights yours as sure as the tide.”

Euron paused, his hands on his hips, shifting on his feet. He wagged a finger. “Ah, but what of her pet wolf?” he asked meanly. “I saw him sniffing about her heels. He’s a king now too-- somehow. Seems to me she’s opened her legs for the pup already.” He scratched his chin, shrugging. “Not that I’m blaming her, really. Handsome lad. Pretty mouth, he’s got.”

Theon felt himself go cold, hearing Euron speak in such a way of his brother in all but blood. He slammed his eyes shut, tamping back the disgust, the rage. He finally looked back at his uncle, smiling as coldly and confidently as he could manage. “You forget that the King in the North is bastard-born, my lord,” he explained. “You think a queen of such an ancient and great name, the commander of one of the biggest armies ever assembled, and the mother of three dragons, could ever allow herself marry a bloody bastard boy?”

“She could just legitimize him,” Euron returned with a girlish wave. “Shouldn’t be too hard for a
dragon bitch.” He turned on his heel to return to the table, the matter seemingly decided.

“Too much trouble,” Theon said in a rush, feeling like he was losing his uncle’s previous interest. “Tell me, what is more attractive, my lord? Legitimizing a bastard with little to offer except a wasteland realm and a few thorny barbarians? Or a king with a fleet she has yet to defeat and now the might of the Golden Company under his sway?”

Euron turned back to face him, tapping his chin and frowning in thought. He stepped closer to him, bending his face to be just inches from his own. “I think not,” Euron finally said, deathly quiet. He stared for a moment longer and Theon felt himself wilt, just a bit.

His uncle turned again, marching back to the table. “Tell your dragon bitch that Euron Greyjoy magnanimously declines her request and that all her Dothraki barbarians will be dead come tomorrow—” he paused, considering with a nod. “Except for the women. We will take them as slaves. Shame to waste good cunny.” With that, he flopped back in his chair to a chorus of laughter.

Theon prickled, feeling inexplicable rage boil up in his belly. “What has Cersei Lannister promised you?” he shouted, the echo of his words seemingly filling the now silent room, ringing loudly in his ears. “What are you doing with 10,000 men and siege machines and elephants raiding defenseless women and children? Taking nearly abandoned castles? Is this the duty of a great conqueror? Of the king of Westeros?”

Theon couldn’t be sure, but he would have sworn that he saw something like well-tended anger spark in his uncle's wide eyes. He was silent for a long time, frozen in some hidden conflict Theon could not comprehend. Euron finally lifted a hand, a terrifying smile spreading over his lips as he wagged his finger. “Now, you see, most would not give such sensitive information to the lap dog of their enemy,” he said, shifting in his chair, leaning towards him and squinting. “But, I do have exclusive orders from Queen Cersei that your dragon bitch be fully aware of what we intend to do.”

Theon swallowed, knees gone watery. Euron looked over at a man seated to his right and tilted his chin. “Lord Strickland,” he called, “perhaps you’d like to explain to my dear nephew the nature of our quest?”

The man named Strickland nodded at Theon, almost in deference. The man’s face was solemn, tired. He looked little of a warrior-- portly and gray-haired and balding. He rubbed his two forefingers over his thumb, considering. “We have been tasked with laying waste to the former slaver cities of Meereen, Yunkai, and Astapor. Good Queen Cersei as well as the Iron Bank have seen the folly of the Dragon Queen’s regime and her unmaking of an ancient and… profitable industry.”
Theon swallowed, knowing that he had gone pale, that his hands were shaking behind his back. He looked back to his uncle who-- surprisingly-- was looking somewhat surly. “So, dear nephew, you see what is at stake here,” Euron said, spreading his palms. “More booty and women than I could ever hope--”

“And perhaps years of siege,” Theon cut across him, feeling a bit desperate, a bit wild. “Is that what you wish, uncle? To be Cersei’s pet captain, sent to the other side of the world while she sits the Iron Throne and forgets all about you and this folly?”

Something so dangerous flared in Euron’s face at that, Theon almost flinched. His uncle lunged to his feet, slamming his fist upon the table. “A year!” he roared. “That is all it would take to see those cities burned and their people in chains!”

“Daenerys Targaryen is not a bloody fool,” Theon protested, something of a wicked grin sliding onto his face, satisfied that he had seemingly prodded whatever thorn was obviously lodged in his uncle’s side. “She has left the cities well fortified. And perhaps you have forgotten your history, uncle, but the slaver cities can withstand siege for years with even the most paltry force.”

His uncle’s face darkened, his fury barely bridled. Theon went on, daring to step closer. “And what of the Dragon Queen herself?” Theon asked, looking not only Euron, but also to Lord Strickland. “What reason would Cersei want for ensuring that Daenerys Targaryen hears of your intentions?”

Something in Euron’s face flickered, his cheeks draining of color. He swallowed thickly, exchanging what seemed to be a knowing glance with Lord Strickland. Strickland, to his credit, remained impassive, but looked a bit pale.

“Tell me, uncle,” Theon said, his confidence building, leaning his palms on the edge of the table before him. “Would you rather fight long and bloody wars a world away? Or lay in a feather bed with the most beautiful woman in the world as King of the Seven Kingdoms within a fortnight?”

“The Golden Company does not break a contract,” Strickland protested. “‘Our word is as good as gold,’ as they say. We are nothing without our reputation.”

Euron held up a staying hand to his companion, never breaking eye contact. He licked his lips, leaned further toward Theon and said: “We have much to talk about, nephew.”

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Jaime Lannister thought of the last time he had seen the Dragon Queen-- perfect and imperious, stepping from the shoulder of a dragon as it were no more than a litter. Her heather gray eyes had remained impassable, as steady and unassuming as a bear trap under the leaves.

The queen that sat before him now seemed a different creature-- thoroughly touched by battle, breathtaking and beautiful in a wholly different way.

With a fading red slash over her eye, her hair shorn and wild to her shoulders, her mouth a grim and fearsome line, she looked every bit like a warrior priestess-- legends of which Jaime had only heard tale of: fierce creatures that resided in moon-filled woods, with blood on their teeth and snakes in their hands. Her eyes, cool and calm before, now gazed at him with an old and distant fire, something untouchable that teemed within her blood, igniting the loam of her irises as good as a spark on tinder.

Jon Snow stood with a black and hateful gaze at the queen’s side, shifting and glowering like a hungry wolf as Jaime and Bronn knelt before them, weaponless and terrified.

Arya Stark stood with her brother, hand on the pommel of her slender blade. Sansa Stark, Ser Davos, Lord Varys and a tall, slender, dark-eyed woman Jaime did not know sat on either side of the queen. All looked grim and dour and did nothing to assuage Jaime’s turning gut.

“Ser Jaime Lannister,” Daenerys finally declared, eyes flashing. “Step forward.”

Jaime did as he was bidden, bowing with a gracious smile. “Your Grace.”

“My Hand received some very interesting news this evening.”

Jaime swallowed, chancing a glance at Tyrion who stood at Daenerys’ other side, looking bleak and impassive. He then looked to Brienne, who averted her eyes, shifting on her feet.

As soon as he and Bronn had been called from their chamber just moments ago, he had simply known. All the confirmation that Jaime needed came when Ser Jorah had informed them that their swords belts were better left in their rooms.
“Play dumb,” Bronn had muttered to him as Brienne, The Hound, and Ser Jorah marched them through the corridors. “That should be easy enough for you, eh?”

Jaime cleared his throat. “Yes, Your Grace?”

“It has come to my attention that you might not have been entirely forthright with my lord husband, King Jon Snow, first of his name.”

Jaime quailed at this, his face slackening, blood draining from his face. His eyes turned to Tyrion again, who looked away. He glanced around at the others gathered, hoping to find some hint of shock, but seemed that he and his companion were the only ones gathered in the Great Hall that had been left in the dark. In fact, when his eyes landed on Lady Arya, she seemed to be smiling faintly, watching Jaime squirm with no small amount of triumph in her face.

That… changed things considerably, and certainly not in his favor. He offered another bow. “I am sorry, Your Grace and…” he turned to Jon with another bow. “Your Grace… for not knowing of your recent marriage. I offer my congratulations--”

“A lie to a king is a grievous offense, my lord,” Daenerys cut across him coldly. “One that will not be tolerated while I may draw breath.”

Jaime nodded. “I wouldn’t expect anything different, Your Grace.”

Daenerys smiled, cold and unamused.

“Your Grace,” Tyrion began carefully, “Ser Jaime, though his good judgment may be lacking, has proven himself to be of noble character.”

“Noble character?” Daenerys repeated, incredulous. “This man failed to report Cersei’s treachery in full witness of you, Lord Varys, Ladies Sansa and Arya as well as the king himself--”

“I did not know the change of title for our Lord Snow, Your Grace--” Jaime blurted before biting back his protests hastily, despite his indignance. He felt his blood run cold as saw Tyrion hang his head in hopeless consternation.
Something queer took hold of Daenerys’ face, as if she were fighting back laughter. “Even if we had not wed before the eyes of gods and men, my lord, you have lied before my stoutest ally, and so have lied to me. Do you deny these charges?”

“No,” Jaime finally said grimly. “No, I do not.”

“Then what could you possibly have to say to defend yourself, my lord?” Daenerys asked lightly, folding her hands before her. “Please, I am most curious what you have to say.”

“I knew of Cersei’s betrayal, aye,” Jaime began, gathering every ounce of resolve left to him. “But I only knew that she had sent Euron and his fleet to Essos, to ferry the Golden Company back to King’s Landing.” He shook his head, despaired to his core. “I do not know what she has done, or what she plans to do with such a force.”

The queen peered at him, skeptical. “Even if you did not know of what you traitor sister planned to do with the Golden Company once they arrived-- which I highly doubt, my lord, considering the… relationship you have with the pretender queen-- that does not change the fact that you chose to omit the very important detail that Cersei Lannister had no intention of holding to the truce reached at the Dragon Pit.”

Jaime hung his head, searching for the words to explain himself.

“My queen…” Jaime looked up to see Tyrion turned to Daenerys, looking torn between desperation and abject fear. “My brother may be foolish, but surely… now you know that he came here with the Lannister forces against Cersei’s wishes. Without her consent--”

Daenerys held up her hand, slowly turning her face towards Tyrion and he wilted under the heat of her eyes. “You plead for your brother’s life, and I cannot fault you for that,” she said, her voice deadly and level, calm as a mill pool. “But I can fault you for knowing of this treachery well before the raven arrived. Tread carefully, my lord Hand, or you may find yourself standing beside your brother, pleading for your own precious head.”

“You take Jaime Lannister’s head you can kiss those 20,000 Lannister soldiers good bye, Your Grace,” Bronn piped up from behind Jaime, brave and brazen as ever. “Only reason they’re here is because they love this bloody fool more than sense.”

Daenerys considered for a long moment, her eyes flashing between the two supplicants before her,
something in her face softening.

“Your Grace, I know you bear little love for me or my family, and in that I could never blame you,” Jaime pleaded, pouncing upon the seeming weakening of her resolve. He felt as though he had just spotted a fat fish under a piece of thin ice after days of hunger. “It was foolish of me to not tell the lord—King Snow. I latched onto some fool idea that such news would only serve to fracture and anger in a time when those things are not needed. I assumed that my sister would keep the Golden Company close to her— that it would be another problem for another time.”

“Your sister seems to be more… enterprising than you give her credit for, my lord,” Jon Snow said, voice steeped in something black and lethal that made Jaime shiver, just a bit. Jaime had always remembered Jon Snow as the brooding, sensitive lad taking out all his youthful frustrations in the training yard.

It was hard for him, now, to reconcile the boy he knew with the man that stood before him now.

“Let me help you, Your Graces,” Jaime said hastily. “I have come to know the madness of my sister more intimately than anyone here. Has not everyone in this room underestimated her at one point or another?” He glanced at Tyrion, then at Brienne. Neither offered him any looks of comfort, of reassurance. “I can help you, Your Graces, to exact the vengeance you seek.”

There was a long pause before Daenerys flicked her eyes up at Jon, who nodded. “Take them to the dungeons,” he commanded Brienne, Jorah, and The Hound. “We will deliberate more upon this later.”

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Tyrion was well familiar with the space between a ‘rock’ and a ‘hard place’. During his brief tenure as Hand to Joffrey, it was often his constant stasis.

But even all his days disposing of said rocks and hard places within the halls of the Red Keep did not well prepare him for this.

Tyrion watched as his queen paced to and fro before the great hearth, wine clutched in her worried fingers.
“Your Grace--” he began, but she held up a staying hand.

“I am not so sure I can take much more of the sound of your voice, my lord,” Daenerys returned, voice tight.

Tyrion wilted, his eyes falling to the dusty stone of the floor. “I think I should like to explain myself. And the many crimes I stand accused of.”

“So you admit to these crimes?” she nearly asked primly, body tense as tripwire, shoulders limned with a seam of gold from the fire at her back. “You admit knowing of Cersei's betrayal even before it began?”

“Yes,” he said quietly.

She let out a strange, savage noise through her clenched teeth, turning away to stand before the fire again. “My people, Tyrion,” she began after an impossibly thick silence, “my people are being held hostage by a mad man… and countless more lives under my care are now under the shadow of a hammer.”

She turned back to face him, lips pressed in a thin line. “All because of you and your love for your contemptuous family.” Tyrion flinched, the words stinging like barbs. “You have done nothing but lead me into folly after folly, my lord. I cannot help but wonder to what end.”

She stepped slowly closer to him again, the heat of her wrath sloughing off her like leaves in a gale. He shifted his eyes downward, feeling wretched, as useless as a frayed rope. “Give me even one reason I shouldn’t be mounting your golden head on a spike.”

He closed his eyes, trying mightily to gather all his fleeing strength, his jostling nerves. “Because, like it or not, Your Grace, you need me. And you know it. I know it-- else my golden head would already be on that spike.” He dared meet her eyes. “Like it or not, I only act in your best interest--”

She cut across him with a vicious and bitter laugh, eyes wide in disbelief. “Best interest? It was in my best interest to send the bulk of my fleet into the hands of Euron Greyjoy? To have my Unsullied ensnared in a vicious trap so they may capture a scrap of rock? For you to look me in the face, day after day, and never tell me what Cersei was plotting?”
Tyrion shifted, his fear swelling under the rage of his queen that was fast becoming restless and unruly. “My queen, I never knew… I did not know that Cersei planned on sending Euron to Essos. I thought the Crown bankrupt, far from affording anything like the fee for a cadre of sellswords… much less the Golden Company. And I certainly did not know--”

“She played you,” Daenerys snapped. “Tell me, my lord, what card did she pull against you this time?”

Tyrion shook his head, shame soaking into every pore. Ever since his audience with his brother… just hours ago, he had turned this over in his brain like a totem. Had Cersei been lying through her teeth the whole time? Was his sister actually even pregnant? Was he such a gods damned fool? “Your Grace… she led me to believe that she is with child.”

His queen stepped closer to him, and it took him all his strength to not take a careful step back. “And you believed this farce?”

Tyrion nodded, voice stuck in his throat, tongue like a slab of lead in his mouth.

Impossibly, Tyrion felt the air around them shift-- something breaking like water upon rock. His queen moved away, her shoulders lower, her stance easier than it was just moments before. “I suppose…” she began over her shoulder, voice thoughtful. “That you thought you could save the child in her womb?”

“Yes, my queen,” he responded weakly. “I-- I thought…” He stopped, clearing his throat, trying to keep the hope from his voice. “I was only acting as I thought you would have desired… preserving any and all innocent life. Even one residing within the belly of your enemy.”

Tyrion watched as his queen did something very queer then-- she brushed a thoughtless hand over her abdomen, her eyes far away, before she lowered herself into a chair. She looked weak and pallid, her eyes bruised with exhaustion. She indicated the chair opposite her with a wave. “Sit, my lord, explain yourself.”

Tyrion felt himself freeze, for just a moment, not daring to believe that he had dodged the axe just yet, before he found his legs and walked unsteadily towards the chair opposite her and settled in stiffly. He leaned forward, folding his hands between his knees. “I did not tell you, my queen, because I thought it would not matter much. The same folly my brother believed, I’m afraid.” He sighed, looking to the floor. “I know that does not seem logical, but, well, your mind was made up as good as my sister’s was.”
Something in Daenerys’ eyes flared at that, but she looked away, taking another prim sip of her wine.

“If I had told you of her planned betrayal, you would have delayed marching north and a long and bitter siege would have ensued— the north would have been left undefended and the dead unfettered.” He kissed his teeth, looking to the fire. “The plan, Your Grace, was to simply tend to business here while Cersei puttered away in the capital, pissing away what little gold the Crown still had left, using her dwindling forces to snuff out the inevitable fires of rebellion and running them ragged from Dorne to the Riverlands. When we were finished here and came for the city… well, Cersei would be weak, outnumbered, well-hated. Songs of you and your victory over Death itself would have filtered in. The people would already love you, without you spilling another drop of blood.” He smiled, sad and hopeless. “That Cersei, alone and friendless, would plead for her life out of fear for her unborn child.”

His queen sat very still and silent in front of him, locked in an intense and burning struggle within herself. She finally looked away, licking her lips, looking grim and resigned. “And you knew I would grant such a surrender.” Tyrion nodded, feeling himself warm, just a fraction. Daenerys huffed out a disdainful laugh, shaking her head helplessly, before looking at him again. Tyrion was shocked to find a ghost of a smile floating on her lips. “You know me too well, my lord.”

“I know you just enough, my queen,” he replied, a small smile snaking onto his face despite his best efforts to fight it. “Just well enough to counsel you properly, to act on your behalf the way I think you would approve.”

She shifted in her chair, crossing her legs under her skirts. “So, my lord Hand,” she said, giving him a flash of a knowing grin. “What counsel do you have for me in this matter?”

Tyrion leaned back in his chair, letting out a despairing breath. “I fear I do not know where to begin.”

Daenerys looked away again, grim and forlorn. “Nor do I.”

“What does your king say?” Tyrion asked, easy as ever.

She looked at him then, something strangely sad and pained within her face. “I am sorry, my friend, that you had to hear of it in such a way.”
Tyrion lifted a shoulder, able to forgive almost anything at this juncture, simply relieved that he seemed to have fallen in his queen’s good graces again. “I’ve grown used to it,” he said with a grin.

There was a lengthy silence as Daenerys sipped her wine, gazing into the fire as if it were telling her deep, ancient secrets. She looked down at her hands. “I wish you could have been there,” she finally said, voice as quiet as the whisper of the flames in the hearth.

Tyrion felt himself break, his shoulders falling in pride, in hopeless love. He felt the sting of tears in his eyes as they quested for her own. “There is time, yet, my queen, for a proper, royal wedding. Surely, nothing else for the rest of my days would prove a higher honor.”

She smiled, so small and sad that Tyrion wished to reach out, to take her hand in his own in comfort. “And I could never hope for anything else in all my days-- to see such a thing become a reality with such tidings at our feet.”

Tyrion nodded glumly, pursing his lips, his mood turning darker, sterner. He shifted back in his chair, rubbing thumb with forefinger. “What is it that you intend to do?”

Daenerys’ face shuttered like the swing of a stable door. “I don’t know.”

“Giving Euron exactly what he wants is obviously no longer a possibility,” Tyrion said dryly as he tapped a worried finger upon the arm of his chair.

Daenerys looked up at him, stunned. “And if it was?” she asked hotly. “You would actually have me accept this beast’s request? You would have me marry him?”

Tyrion shrugged. “It would certainly make things easier, my queen.”

“It is a farce!” she nearly shouted, outrage boiling over. “Some fool thing woven by Theon Greyjoy to save his sister’s life.”

Tyrion pointed a knowing finger at her. “And your people’s lives, my queen,” he returned coolly. “Without whatever spell of political guile and wiley deception that befell Theon that night, I can’t even think upon what may have befallen those left on Dragonstone.”
Daenerys seemed to deflate at this, huffing out a pained breath. She stood again, beginning her worried pacing before the hearth anew. “I must go.”

Tyrion shook his head, coming to his feet as well. “And do what, Your Grace? Fly to Dragonstone with no support?”

“If I must,” she responded coldly, not looking at him.

“Then you doom yourself to capture or worse. And your own new lord husband to--”

She rounded on him, her face pale, the skin near her collar bone gleaming in the firelight with a cold sweat he found alarming. “You forget, my lord, I am untouchable upon Drogon.”

“Lest you forget, my queen, I was there at the Blackwater Rush.” He stepped toward her, catching her eyes in his own so that she may see the hopeless worry, the needy plea, that resided there. “You are certainly not untouchable upon Drogon.”

“If I do nothing, my lord,” she returned, voice clipped and cold. “Then I doom my people to death and enslavement.”

“The slaver cities are well fortified, Your Grace,” he returned patiently. “They will hold until the war here is won--”

“I cannot take that chance.”

“And I cannot take the chance of losing you, my queen!” he found himself shouting, his blood coming to a sudden boil. “Do you not think that this is all in Cersei’s plan? Why else would the raven from Euron tell us everything he intended to do? She wants to flush you out, Your Grace, to get you alone and blind with fury!”

Daenerys’ eyes flashed and she seemed to swell, a panther caught in a corner. “I can fly to Dragonstone on Drogon, burn his ships and every last one of his men and be back within the week, my lord.” She looked away, taking a deep breath, trying to stanch her anger. “Rhaegal may stay here. If the dead come upon our door, he will win this war for me.”
“And if he flies off fearing you dead?” Tyrion asked, feeling lost again, that he had lost her once more-- so soon after getting her back. “If you are knocked from Drogon’s back? If Drogon falls to a Scorpion or worse?”

Daenerys shook her head, looking despairing, discomfited. “What would you have me do?” she asked quietly. “Put it out of my mind? Allow my people to suffer and die?”

“Do nothing, Your Grace,” Tyrion pleaded, stepping closer, helpless and desperate. “Do you remember?”

Her face turned cold, her eyes shading with something poisonous. “Yes,” she spat, “and Jon Snow would have been dead.”

Tyrion sagged, his strength faltering. He shook his head, pressing on. “Doing nothing is sometimes the hardest thing to do--”

“Enough” Daenerys barked. Tyrion looked at her, feeling alarm and concern course through him like a thunderbolt. She looked as pallid as candle wax as she clutched her belly, her harried pacing halting. Sweat was beading upon her brow now and she settled into her chair again, hands shaking. Tyrion stepped toward her, worried.

“Leave me, Tyrion,” she said through gritted teeth. “I will consider all that you’ve said-- please.”

“Your Grace…” he said slowly, walking to the sideboard and pouring her a cup of water. She drank it down greedily when he handed it to her before pointing to the door.

“Please, my lord,” she repeated.

He nodded, stepping slowly from her. “Get some rest, my queen,” he pleaded with a shallow bow, before striding to the door, reluctance and confusion shading his every step.

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He found her.

She had ridden out, blessedly alone, hooded and cloaked with tears stinging her eyes in the icy chill of the northern night. She had heard the cry of her children, and nothing could stop her from answering.

She lay within the warm ashes of their nest, tucked into the Wolfswood. It had been days since she had heard their voices, and the sweet music of it as it had filtered into her mind, as comforting as new sunlight.

She shifted her cloak against her ankles, the wind biting even through her leather trousers, and lay her head upon Drogon’s flank. His heat bled into her like a healing salve, and she sighed, letting her mind draw itself blank, if only for a little while. She thought distantly of Pentos-- of soft, black earth, of sun-baked paving stones as hot as coals, of red-painted doors and the sweet scent of lemons.

But he found her, and she had to stifle the flame of irritation that leapt within her breast when she heard his horse tramp through the trees.

After the trial of Jaime Lannister, after her arduous talk with Tyrion, she had holed herself away in her room, bent over a chamberpot, hands shaky, chest heaving. She had pressed her sore shoulders to the cold stone of the wall, her mind whirling and inconsolable, cursing all those gods she did not believe in.

How dare they send Jon Snow into her life when the world held on by merely a thread? How dare they bequeath her with the inchoate life in her belly when every last thing she loved was perched upon nothing more than a face of crumbling stone?

She had sobbed, had torn at her hair, had beat her fists sore and red upon the stone of the floor, curling in on herself like a dying vine, until the calls of her children had stirred her from her dark lassitude.

And now she sat among the ashy earth and dusty snow, keeping her eyes shut determinedly, as petulant as a child, unwilling to lift the spell of solitude just yet.

She listened as he dismounted, still some distance away, his feet slowly taking him closer to the little nest. She felt Drogon lift his great head, muscles shifting under her skull. She heard Rhaegal’s
soft chirrup of greeting, and Dany couldn’t help but open her eyes, intrigued by a sound that was usually reserved only for her.

She watched as Jon peeled off a glove, reached his hand forward. His motions were far more assured than the last time she had witnessed him with any of her children. He stepped closer to the smaller dragon with barely a hesitation, shushing and clicking affectionately— as if he had missed the beast. “Hello there, friend,” he whispered.

She felt tears burn anew in her eyes, as she let her head fall back upon Drogon’s hot hide, angry that he should be so perfectly fashioned for her.

Before she knew it, she had to stand, Drogon now overcome with curiosity and coming to his feet with an envious moan. “Such a child,” Dany muttered to him as he stepped towards Jon, sniffing and purring.

Jon laughed, stepping back from Rhaegal and placing a bare palm upon Drogon’s snout. “Hello, there,” he greeted, a small, amused smile playing on his lips. “Nice to see you, too.”

Dany stood, trapped between two, thorny bodies— creatures of a dark and deep magic, beasts that contained little of what men could ever hope to understand— and looked on as this so-called bastard boy from a frozen realm ran rough knuckles over their chins and spoke to them as if they were no more than children.

She stepped forward, her reticence fading, her heart betraying her, missing him though he stood but feet away. “You should close your eyes,” she told him, reaching up and grasping one of the great spikes crowning Rhaegal’s head. Jon looked at her, stunned, broken from a heady and heavy spell. “Close your eyes, try to clear your mind. They will speak to you that way.”

He shook his head, turning back to Drogon with unsure eyes. “I cannot speak to dragons as you do.”

“You are blood of my blood,” she said, voice flat and final and he quailed, just a bit, looking to his boots. “You are the only other left on this world who can do such a thing. We must protect such a gift, grow it.” She stepped closer to him, laying a hand on Rhaegal’s brow. The dragon blinked his great, golden eyes at her knowingly. “Should I fall, my children must—”

“That will not happen,” Jon cut across her, eyes sparking, stepping closer to her.
“Should I fall,” she continued, voice level and gaze steady. “My children will need guidance, assurance.” She stepped to Drogon, stroking his neck lovingly. “A dragon is not meant to be alone. They will tear the world asunder otherwise.”

Jon looked at her, defiant and sad. She almost wanted to kiss him then-- all star-studded and moon-garbed, eyes black as obsidian and just as sharp. He finally heaved a great sigh and nodded, closing his eyes.

“Just breathe, my love,” she told him, stepping around him slowly. “I know it may seem impossible, but try to empty your mind. Try searching for a marble. A red marble, at the center of your thoughts. Nothing else matters but the marble.”

She continued walking softly around him, watching him, pleased when his shoulders began to fall, his face slackening. She stopped her pacing. “What do you hear?” she whispered.

“They flew for days,” Jon answered, eyes screwed shut. “Rhaegal is hurt.”

“Was,” Dany corrected. Her son bore an ugly and pearly scar upon his chest, the scales oddly warped and blurred, but was otherwise unharmed. “Are they speaking to you?”

“Yes,” he answered, breathless, chest heaving. “They’ve seen… the Dead… they are everywhere.”

“Ivestragī jikagon zirīla ,” ‘let him go,’ she told her sons. Jon sagged, released of their mighty grip, his breath loud and ragged within the quiet circle of trees.

She felt something weak and wavering within her finally break and she stepped forward, taking him within her arms. She closed her eyes, anchoring herself for at least a moment within the heat of his body, the power of his scent.

“They also told me,” he said heavily, pulling away, “of what you intend to do.”

A savage and potent heat sparked deep within her as she stepped away from him. She held her chin high, her shoulders back, tense. Ready for a fight. She knew, in some dim and distant corner of her mind, that there need not be a battle-- especially with her good and noble husband, but she did not
have the strength to find it. “What of it?”

He took an unsteady step back, as if she had just knocked him with a mighty blow. He looked to the ground, shaking his head as her sons settled down around them with sleepy growls. “What of it?” he repeated, incredulous. “How could you say such a thing?”

She strode toward him, her mind and body burning, pining fiercely for the taste of violence, for the sight of the kraken banner crumbling into ash, the smell of burnt stone and boiling blood. She yearned to shut the doors on her dark heart, unwilling to let him glimpse the monster that resided inside her, but her hands grappled against a failing lock, rusted hinges.

“Such a thing?” she asked, searching his dark, troubled face. “Euron holds my people captive… he dangles their very lives before my nose like a cat with a mouse. What else am I to do?” Jon looked away, helpless, despair soaking into every line of his brow. She grabbed him by the wrist, fingers digging into the delicate twist of bones there. “Tell me, husband, what will you have me do?”

“Stay,” he said so quietly, voice so devastating she nearly reeled. “Daenerys…”

She wanted to speak, to tell him everything, but her voice died under the weight of the secret she hoarded behind her breast, the treacherous path of her thoughts.

“You leaving is exactly what Cersei wants,” Jon continued heavily. “She wants to draw you out. Wants to keep you battling forever, until you die under sword and spear or she figures out another cruel way of defeating you.”

She gave him a long, searching look. Reading the maps of his scars, his wrinkles and creases. “I cannot stay.”

“I don’t believe you.”

She scoffed but he spoke again before she could shoot back. “You would’ve left hours ago if you really intended upon leaving.” He shifted on his feet, something rare and anguished twitching under his skin. “I came here to see for myself.”

She felt herself prickle, thought his tone did not suggest an admonishment. “I would not ride off without telling you.”
He stepped closer, crowding her, and she felt a strange and acidic swirl in her belly, rising and rising, burning through her heart, into her throat at his lack of fear, his utter trust that he was safe with her, within the protective circle her dragons. “It would not have been the first time, Lord Tyrion tells me.”

She felt herself go cold, doused by an odd, cold wind of betrayal. “And what other secrets has he shared of mine, husband?” she snarled, meanness lacing her tongue before she could stop it, blackness girding every nerve. “What other gossip should I know of that has been so happily consumed by you and my faithful Hand?”

He dared grab her by the arms. “That is not what this is about--”

“Is it not?” she fired back, feeling a bit hysterical, a bit mad. Her world was crashing down around her and she was ready to start at the foundation stones, pulling them out, brick by brick, so that the destruction of everything she loved may be of her own making. “Is this not because Lord Tyrion has convinced you that I cannot protect my people? That I cannot be trusted?”

She thought of standing on the hot sands of the training yards in Astapor, listening dully to Kraznys’ insults and ribald jokes. She remembered Khal Moro yanking on her rope, treating her as chattel, languishing in the frail glory of the treasure he had found. She remembered Xaro Xhoan Daxos, simpering and smiling and flattering without shame.

Even those she trusted, those that loved and adored her, had underestimated her at one time or another.

But only one man had never dared underestimate her and he was standing before her now. And she couldn’t help feel a twist of cold credulity, that he should do so now.

Jon blinked, hurt flashing on his brow, and she felt her insatiable, nameless rage slow within her, if just a fraction. “We need you here,” he repeated, teeth clenched against some unknowable pain, face downturned. “We need you--”

“You and Tyrion,” she spat, wrenching herself from his grip, knowing full-well she was swiftly losing control, “pushing me about like a game piece upon a board.” She leaned forward, teeth gritted and bared in an animal-like snarl. “I will have it no longer, my lord. I will kill this pretender and all the men who follow him before he can scarcely lift a blade. Before he can destroy all that I hold dear.”
“All that you hold dear?” he protested hotly, eyes sparking as he looked back up at her. “You fly away to burn Euron to cinders while your lord husband drowns under a sea of dead? Is this what you intend?”

“We may be newly married, Jon Snow, but I am not yours to command,” she snarled, her irresponsible wrath reaching a fever-pitch. “I will take what is mine--”

“With fire and blood?” he interrupted loudly, eyes dangerous and bright with something that might have been betrayal. “Is that it, Daenerys?”

She bit her tongue until she was sure she would draw blood.

“If you ride off tonight, the dead will break upon us while you are gone and we will all surely die,” Jon shouted. “Me, my sisters, your Unsullied, the Dothraki, everyone. They are your people as well, Daenerys.”

She closed her eyes, thinking of the raven, the mean words committed to her memory like some cruel poem.

*It brings me great pleasure to inform the Queen Daenerys that Euron Greyjoy has accepted Her Grace’s gracious offer of marriage. Come within the fortnight to bind and consummate with His Grace. Tarry at your peril-- His Grace is most impatient, and will not hesitate to take up his orders from Queen Cersei to stay all your people here on the island of your birth and sail to the so-called Bay of Dragons to clap irons on every last free slave within the bricked walls of Astapor, Yunkai, and Meereen.*

She opened her eyes again, the bitter press of bile at the base of her tongue making her feel queer and wild. “You mean to imprison me then?” she returned hotly, unable to stop her rage from consuming her, undaunted by counsel or reason.

She saw the fire light within him then, a hungry, greedy fury licking its way through his core, into his mouth. “What else can I say to you, my queen?” he growled, shoulders rising beneath his cloak. “My life and the thousands more under our care seem to mean nothing to you, so be gone, then, and leave me think on how I should die in peace.”

Something very queer happened then.
She felt herself open her mouth, her voice tangled within her throat, lost amid swiftly aborted anger and a potent spell of shame that flared up within her at his words. But just then her fingers went numb, her limbs tingly… her blood beating a hasty retreat. Her knees wobbled, and she shook, just once, before all was swallowed up by blackness and she knew no more.

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He caught her before she could fall.

Every last bit of strength in his limbs fled like leaves in a gale as he shakily lowered her to the burnt earth. Drogon and Rhaegal stirred on either side of him, squawking in fright and confusion, pushing worried snouts to their mother.

“Daenerys,” Jon breathed, his heart hammering in his tongue, his lungs stuttering within his chest. He brushed worried, shaking palms over the crown of her cropped hair, the slope of her shoulders. She was so pale, clammy with sweat, pulse jumping under the white column of her neck.

She stirred after only a few seconds, eyes fluttering, a deep, pained groan welling up in her throat.

“Fuck,” Jon breathed, gathering her back into his arms, gripping her limp form to him tightly. “Fuck, Daenerys… what in the hells happened?”

Daenerys laid boneless and heavy within his hands, her breath taking on a queer pace… frantic, excited. She lifted her hands, carding cold fingers through his hair, cupping the back of his neck.

He wanted to ask her if she was well, ask her what he could do for her-- fetch her water, carry her to Winterfell upon his back, leap onto his horse and ride to the edge of the world and pluck some magic, bitter herb from the top of a mountain-- but he could not. His voice had retreated, lodged somewhere deep under the mighty weight of his relief.

The dragons shifted, settling back down with worried groans and there was silence for a long while. Jon buried his face into her neck, making a shelter within the heat of her body, the puff of her breath against his ear.

“I carry your child,” she whispered, voice wrecked and weak, lined with a strange and sad sort of happiness.
He froze, all senses fleeing. He managed to break away from her, to search for the truth in her face. She smiled at him, small and real, brushing an adoring thumb over the ridge of his brow. She barked out a laugh. "I know, my love, I can scarcely believe it."

He felt his breath return to him, puffing out hot and labored, his heart struggling to keep up. He pressed his hand to her cheek, testing her reality. She circled her fingers over his wrist, pressing a resolute kiss onto the bones there, her lips searing with promise.

Something like a ragged sob, like a breathless laugh, tore from his mouth. He brought his other hand to the back of her head, pressing her forehead to his own, thirsting for the magic that she held within her breath. "You…" he began, panting as if he had just swam a league of icy water to get back to her. "You are sure?"

"I’ve yet to see a maester," she admitted, blushing. "But I know it now. I have suspected for some time."

"Fuck," he swore, pulling her to him again, his eyes unable to fully carry the weight that was the vision of her-- ash-smeared and dawn-eyed, a spellcaster sketching out glyphs of power upon some rain-wet rock. "Fuck, Daenerys…"

She laughed quietly against his collar bone. "Are you pleased, my king?"

He leaned away from her again, hands tangled in her hair, glowing like quicksilver in the moon. He shook his head, eyes rimmed in heat, vision blurred and cracked. "Even if I were the finest bard in the Seven damned Kingdoms, Daenerys, I would not be able to say how much."

She looked at him, her expression breaking, face falling into some kind of hopeless relief, an unknowable happiness. "I am sorry, Jon, for not telling you sooner." She gasped, choking on a sob. "I believed so long to be barren… the only thing to come from my womb a monster… I never dared to hope…"

Jon shushed her with a searing kiss, licking the words of doubt and worry from her mouth, the tears leaking free and hot down his cheeks.

She broke apart from him, a laugh bubbling in her throat. She stroked her hands over his face, and he could scarcely believe the way she was looking at him-- as if he were some rare and green glade
hidden within the scorched earth-- the only home she had ever known.

And, by the gods, he could only ever hope to be worthy of it.

“I love you,” he murmured. “So much.” He kissed her brow, the ridge of her nose. “There is so much to talk about.” He pressed his brow to her own again, feeling dizzy, floating somewhere just above his body-- the heat of her the only thing keeping him rooted to the earth. “So much to plan-”

“I won’t go to Dragonstone,” she said immediately, shaking her head. “I never… I never thought I would actually do it. I just-- they are my children too, Jon. And I--”

“Shh,” he whispered, pulling her into his arms. “I know, I know...” He couldn’t help but release a heavy sigh of relief, though more worries flooded in to fill the void. A child … he closed his eyes, the triumphant chorus of his shock and joy taking on an edge of rancor, of bleak dread.

He halted his spiralling thoughts in their tracks, pulling savagely at the reins, before they barreled him clear off a cliff. “As I said, so much to talk of.” He leaned back, grasping her by the elbows as he nudged her up to a standing position. She wobbled, just a bit, and Jon would have none of it. “But I think it is best that we do it in a featherbed in front of a large fire,” he pointed out as he swung an arm under her knees and hoisted her up into his arms.

She gave a surprised yelp. “Do you mean to carry me all the way to Winterfell, Jon Snow?”

He smiled, still somehow spellbound everytime she said his full name-- always meaning that she was playing at being cross with him. “You honor me, Your Grace,” he said bringing her to her horse, hobbled and grazing lazily at the edge of the clearing. “But I think riding should be much easier on my back, if you can manage.”

She peered at him a raised brow, her eyes disapproving. He placed her carefully on the ground, helping her hoist herself into her saddle. “If you insist, Your Grace,” She said as she gathered her reins. She looked down at him, quizzical. “What? What’s that look on your face for?”

He grinned, knowing he must look a fool. “It’s the first time you’ve called me that.”

She rolled her eyes, though a smile was hidden poorly within her lips. “Best be careful, Jon Snow,
or it might be the last time.”

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Sam tramped through the loam, the Godswood as eerily silent as ever. He squinted through the trees, the stars blotted out by dark, velveteen clouds. He tried very hard to balance the tray of food and the ewer of water as he stepped over root and branch and stone. It was no small feat; Sam was not known for grace.

He finally came to the Weirwood and Sam slowed. Arya had warned him that Bran was… different. Even moreso than when Sam had first arrived in Winterfell-- stoic and cold and as distant as a star. She had told him that he barely spoke a word these days and seemed to live off only a bite of bread and a few sips of water each day.

But Sam had so much he wanted to talk to his friend about-- the nature of how the revenant dragon died, the curious healing of the queen’s wound, the crater left by the Night King Jon had told him about.

But as he neared his friend, he realized that he may not get his wish.

“Bran?” he asked quietly.

The man was turned toward the tree, eyes closed, head hanging between his narrow shoulders under his cloak.

“Bran?” Sam asked again, placing the tray down beside another that lay beside Bran’s wheeled chair, cold and barely touched. Sam knelt beside him, licking his lips nervously and jostling Bran’s arm, just a bit.

Bran gasped, his breath rattling deep in his chest as if he had been dragged from the bottom of a lake. His hands gripped the arms of his chair, knuckles gone white. His head snapped back, his spine straightening, the chords of his neck standing out like ropes.

Sam yelped, falling back onto his ass and into the leafy moss. “Bran!” he shouted, struggling to stand up again, shock still rolling through his limbs. “Bran! Seven Hells!”
He watched as Bran’s eyes seemed to clear, to focus, his breathing growing slower, steadier.

“Seven Hells, Bran, are you alright?” Sam asked shakily, taking a step towards him.

Bran looked… well he looked very *unwell*. His face was gaunt, as sallow as milk. Darkness rimmed the hollows of his eyes. He looked a not but a ghoul.

“Sam,” Bran said weakly, after a long moment. “You… you’re back?”

Sam nodded. “Been back for hours,” he answered, carefully relieved. “Forgive me, but you look a fright, Bran. When was the last time you got a proper meal? A proper *sleep*?”

Bran looked down, face vaguely quizzical, as if trying to remember what he had to eat that morning. “When did the Night King fall?”

Sam shouldn’t have been surprised that Bran seemingly knew all the details already. Knowing what he knew about his friend and his… abilities, he should have been used to it-- but it never failed to make Sam just a bit uneasy. “Nearly five days ago.” Sam shook his head, bending to retrieve the tepid stew he had brought from the kitchens. “You’re telling me it’s been five days since your last proper meal?”

Bran waved off the bowl Sam pushed under his nose. “I don’t need it, Sam.”

“*Yes, you do,*” Sam protested, attempting to press the bowl in his friend’s lap. Bran relented, curling his fingers over the lip of it. “Everyone needs food-- even the bloody Three Eyed Raven.”

Bran swirled the spoon disinterestedly, looking pensive. “I don’t think I’ll be needing food much longer.”

Sam stilled, looking over at his friend worriedly. “What the Seven Hells is that supposed to mean, Bran?”
Bran smiled coldly into his soup before lifting his spoon and taking a helping. “Because I will be dead tomorrow, if all goes well.”

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Chapter End Notes

OMG you guys.

First, THANK YOU ALL SO MUCH for voting this crazy yarn for best angst. I seriously could NOT be more humbled! Y’all are the best readers a girl could ask for.

Also, sorry about the delay in this chapter. I was ready to pull the trigger on this last week, but my lovely beta hardlyfatal pulled the reins on that idea real fast-- for good reason. Several rewrites were had.

As always, a huge thanks goes out to my Tarts: NoOrdinaryLines, meisie, Ashleyfanfic, jaqtkd, TheSparkles59, and Justwanderingneverlost. Thank you so much for your support, ladies!

And, of course, to my faithful readers. With all your love and support, this thing would have died out awhile ago.

Tune in in three weeks for The Long Night and all that fun stuff. <3
Dark Days

Chapter Summary

He was silent for a long while, struck still and silent by something immense that she could not reckon with. His lovely face was cast in orange and black, making him seem some creature of light and shadow. His eyes were nothing more than pinpricks of gold within a depthless dark. Finally, he stepped forward, his hands worrying at the buckles at her pauldrons.

“I don’t know what I did,” he said so quietly she almost missed it as he pulled off a pauldron and set it upon the couch behind him. “I don’t know how any man could earn a woman like you, but if I think on it for much longer I may go mad.”

Chapter Notes

When We Last Left Our Heroes, Back In Fucking February:

Dany admitted to being preggo, after weeks of agonizing and ignoring it. Jon is overjoyed but also rightly terrified. They got married on the road back to Winterfell, after defeating Viserion, so Dany introduced him to her khalasar and is trying to get him to tap into his Targ blood by talking to the dragons. They have not made an official marriage announcement yet, but pretty much everyone knows by now and they don’t really give much a fuck because they have much more pressing issues to worry about.

Like how Euron Greyjoy is holding a few thousand Dothraki hostage on Dragonstone (Along with Theon and Yarra) and is threatening to put all of them to the knife before sailing for Slaver’s Bay and doing the same to the freed slaves there. Oh, and Jaime and Bronn arrived with the Lannister army, but Jaime is also an idiot and didn’t tell Jon about the Golden Company. OOPS. Lord Glover also plotted to kill Dany and Jon is rightly pissed about that.

Oh, and the Night King is taking his sweet fucking time marching his horde to Winterfell and that makes everyone properly nervous.

Some things to note: Remember that Dany has a weird ‘scar’ on her thigh now. And Longclaw is structurally (and perhaps fundamentally) changed since Jon used it to give Dany this ‘scar’. And that Bran has been Bran-ing more than usual, especially after the Night King fell from Viserion from a great heaight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
The city was noisy. And, by R'hllo, did it smell.

People complained about the constant clamor and foul odors of King’s Landing often and loudly in Westeros, but those same people obviously had never been to Volantis.
For how many dung-shoveling slaves Volantis boasted, they seemed unable to keep up with the refuse that the many residents of the great city produced each day. She dutifully held a rose-scented kerchief to her nose as she strode through the crowded streets of the Long Bridge. She had not been in this city for many, many years, but her feet still carried to her where she needed to go all the same.

She had arrived on a splendid day for going about the city unnoticed, but on a rather poor one to gain the audience she sought. Today was the Founding Celebration, and Volantis was bursting with visitors from all over Essos—and even some from Westeros. Its citizens, slave and freeholder alike, crowded into the streets, clogging up taverns, brothels and game rooms. The bazaars and markets were similarly stuffed to capacity, as traders shouted their wares and haggled their prices to all asundry.

She came to stop as a mighty shadow passed over her, her mind awhirl, keeping her well distracted from her journey. She looked up to see that she had come to the Black Wall, across the Long Bridge over the mighty Rhyone, before the hallowed walls of Old Volantis. The wicked structure rose nearly 200 feet above her, straight and black and seamless, a mighty relic of magic long gone from the world.

High above, she could hear the distant clatter of chariots, the scream of horses. The customary chariot race was under way. Momentous cheers and boos could be heard even from such lofty heights. A motley gathering of fisherfolk, city peasants, and even some farmers from the countryside were packed into the wide boulevards that surrounded the monolith, hoping to catch even the barest hint of the wild race that they were not permitted to see. She took a great, steadying breath, before stepping to the guard standing at the great gate.

“What business do you have in Old Volantis?” the black armored guard asked in Valyrian.

Melisandre tilted her head to get a better look at the man. He bore the tiger stripes of the slave soldiers of Volantis upon his cheek. When she was here last, the gates of the Black Wall had always been guarded by the second sons of the great families that resided within. *Peculiar*, she thought to herself. *Most peculiar.*

She lowered her hood, the necklace she bore flashing in the sultry light of the evening sun. The guard nodded, knocking his spear twice onto the doors without further question.

She lifted her hood again as the gate rumbled open and she stepped through.
It was much, much cleaner on the other side and the air smelled sweet instead of foul— courtesy of the lemon trees and lavender bushes lining the pristine, white-bricked streets.

It was also nearly deserted, most every resident of Old Volantis gathered at the top of the Black Wall. Only a few slaves who had been left behind by their masters remained, idly wandering the streets and smoking the hash that was so popular here, thoroughly enjoying the solitude. They paid her little mind as she strode to the heart of the ancient city.

Before long, she found herself standing before the gilded gates of the Great Temple of the Lord of Light, feeling her stomach twist. She inwardly cursed herself for her fear. She had left for Westeros with a great purpose, and was returning with that purpose finally fulfilled. At least, for now.

She still had work to do.

She braced herself, closing her eyes for a moment before she leaned her hands against the cool brass of the gate. It clicked open, swinging inward with nary a whisper from its hinges.

“Who stands before the temple of R'hllor?” a voice called from the gathering gloom of the great courtyard.

“I am Melisandre, servant of the Lord of Light,” she announced with all the authority she could muster as she dropped her hood again. “I seek an audience with the Red Council and His Chosen, Kinvara, High Priestess.”

The owner of the voice stepped forward, his tattooed, grim-lined face bathed in the light from the enormous fire raging in the center of the courtyard. The Eternal Light, never once faltering in three hundred years. Though, to hear some tell it, it was the Original Flame, passed down through countless millennia-- a precious gift from the Lord of Light.

“Melisandre,” the man greeted her with a bow of his head. “It has been some time.”

“Gennaro,” she replied with a tight smile. “How are things within the Fiery Hand?”

The man laughed, showing his assortment of gold, stamped teeth. He was bald, with an ugly red slash running from the top of his head to the bottom of his jaw, his left eye shining ghostly and milky blue within the firelight. He had been struck with a short sword within the fighting pits of
Meereen, long ago. A Red Priest brought him back. “About the same as the last three centuries, as you might suspect.”

She inclined her head. “That means peace, I would hope.”

Gennaro nodded, but his brow scrunched, troubled. “I fear not for much longer.”

Melisandre pulled herself straighter. “This is precisely my worry, general,” she said gravely. “Please, I must see Kinvara at once. Tell me that she forswore the race today?”

Genarro nodded. “His Chosen has not been to a race in three years. And she was in Mereen until just recently.” He began to lead her through the courtyard, into the main temple of the sprawling complex. “Tell me, two of R'hllor’s most powerful servants coming back to Volantis within a month of each other— this cannot be coincidence.”

“The Lord of Light’s commands often coincide, general, though we may not mean them to.”

He shook his head as he pushed open the bronze doors of the temple and she felt such a wave of warmth and comfort as she stepped into its blazing chambers she nearly cried out.

The main citadel was carved from solid rock, seemingly a seamless piece of ageless stone, veined with fiery reds and oranges— fire turned to rock by a force that could not be reckoned with.

They passed through the rotunda, where another fire blazed, tall and powerful and ceaseless. They turned down many a corridor, torches flickering and candles guttering in every shadowy corner. Memory, both sweet and painful, flooded her, though she willed her mind clear, her focus sure and steady.

Finally, they reached a great door, made of gleaming hammered copper, the impression of flames licking up length of them.

“The Priestess Melisandre, servant of the Lord of Light to see you, His Chosen,” Genarro announced through the doors and they opened, also as silent as the wind.
Gennaro left her at the entrance, not even the general of the Fiery Hand permitted beyond the threshold of the Sacred Cloister.

She stepped forward, the room near sweltering from the hearths that rimmed the entire line of the room. The air smelt of almond and citrus, the floor carpeted with fine, priceless rugs. The Cloister was a room for meditation, for communing with the sacred fire.

“How long has it been, Sister?” Kinvara called, not rising to her feet from where she sat cross legged on the floor before the unending hearth. “Over five years, it feels like. But perhaps it has been longer?”

“Longer, His Chosen,” Melisandre answered with a bow.

“You may call me ‘Sister’.” The other woman stood, stretching her arms above her head before turning on her bare heel to face her. She smiled brightly, striding towards her, folding her into an unexpected embrace. The woman leaned away from her, squinting at her in question. “Why do you stiffen so, Sister? Were you expecting a cold welcome?”

Melisandre hung her head. She was no longer the young Fire Priestess of Dragonstone—songs of flame-wreathed swords and encroaching darkness burning on her tongue. She had been shaken to her core, left wrecked and bleeding, clutching nothing but a dying ember to her chest where a once a great and hungry fire flared within. “I feel that I am no longer worthy to tread these halls, much less be embraced by the arms of His Chosen.”

Kinvara shook her head, a small smile lighting her face. “You dishonor yourself, Sister.” She stepped away, going to the small, spindly legged table across the room, the only piece of furniture within the space, on which stood a flagon and two chalices. She poured them both a cup of wine. “From what little the flames show me, you have been quite busy in the west. You have suffered and misstepped, yes, but you have served the Lord of Light truly despite such trials.”

Melisandre stepped closer to the other woman, taking the proffered cup and drinking. She could not help but relish the taste. This was no sour cellar wine served upon the whaling frigate she had booked passage on. “You have also been busy, Sister,” Melisandre mummerd. “I feared that you might still be in Mereen.”

Kinvara nodded. “You have also met the Dragon Queen in your travels.” She turned away, gazing back into the fires. “I completed the Lord’s mission in Meereen. There is work to be done here.”
“Yes,” Melisandre said, drawing alongside the other woman. “Have you seen it as well?”

Something in Kinvara’s face fell at that, her already pale skin growing sallow, the star-bright blue of her eyes fading. “The flames show me little, Sister. The Lord of Light hides his will from me.”

“I know well the pain of such abandonment, Sister,” Melisandre answered quietly, casting her eyes down.

“I saw only myself in Volantis, with you standing before me.” Kinvara took a deep pull from her cup, silent for a time. “So tell me, Sister, why have you come so far from the shores of your destiny?”

“I have brought Ice and Fire together, my Sister,” she responded. “And I come here to beg the help of my brethren and the Red Council, to ensure the survival of the world.”

Kinvara quirked an eyebrow at that. “Is that all?”

Melisandre suppressed a smile, looking to the floor. “I have played my part in Westeros, but I have another to play in Essos. As do you and all of our Brothers and Sisters in service to R’hllor.”

The other woman stepped closer to her, regarding her with some amount of wonder. “Tell me, Sister, what have you seen in the flames?”

“You know Daenerys Targaryen. You sung her praises up and down the streets of Meereen. You deemed her the Princess that was Promised, the one to bring the dawn.”

“Are you to tell me you disagree with this assessment?”

Melisandre shook her head, rattled by the hint of danger poorly hidden within Kinvara’s words. “No, Sister,” she assured quickly. “I once thought I had found the hero that would save the world from darkness, but I was wrong.” She stopped, her throat working. “But I also do not believe that your revelation is the whole truth.”

Kinvara’s eyes flared at that. “Oh?”
“There is another, a complement to your queen’s power and might, a man of lowly standing but of highest honor who won himself a crown and united dissimilar peoples, just as Daenerys Stormborn.” She swallowed, her eyes shifting away. “Ice and Fire, in one and both alike, will bring the Dawn, Sister, but they cannot do it alone.”

Kinvara regarded her, thoughtful, for quite some time. “I have also seen glimpses of this man you speak of. A blizzard whirling within a glut of flame. A pale wolf running through a field of fire with the wings of a dragon. I could make little of it, until now.” Melisandre waited as Kinvara began to pace slowly, lost in thought. She finally turned toward her, her brow slanted in doubt. “So you come here to ask for the some three hundred souls in service to the Fiery Hand to help this king and queen half a world away? Such a paltry reward for so long a journey, my friend.”

Melisandre stepped closer to her, resolute. “How many slaves reside in this city?”

Kinvara looked shaken by this question, her eyes widening. She shifted, looking away. “At least a million.”

“And how many freeholders?”

“The slaves outnumber them five to one, Sister.” Kinvara’s eyes shone in the firelight, sudden understanding flaring within.

Melisandre leaned back, tucking her hands in her sleeves. “You praised Daenerys Targaryen from dawn to dusk within the walls of a foreign city for nearly a year, Sister.” Melisandre said slowly, searching her friend’s face. “For what purpose did you do this?”

Kinvara turned her head slowly to her, locking her eyes with Melisandre’s own. “Daenerys wishes to scrub the world of the blight that is slavery,” she answered solemnly. “It is her destiny. Her Great Purpose, after she slays the shadow that threatens us all, slave or master.”

Melisandre tilted her head, a ghost of a smile hidden within her mouth. “The war in the North is also a fight against slavery, Sister. The worst kind of slavery— a bondage that not even death can undo.” She paused, letting the power of her words grow, fill the quiet room until it crackled like an ember. “The gentry of Volantis sit upon the mighty shoulders of their own hubris, Sister. You know this as well as I. It would only take the plucking of a single stone to send it all crashing down.”
Kinvara smiled at her, a fresh and starvning hope blazing within her eyes for a moment. “Word of Daenerys Stormborn and her liberation of the slave cities has blazed through Volantis, it is true. They grow restless and rebellious with a hope they never thought they would see in their lifetime. The seed has indeed been sown.”

Melisandre inclined her head. “I heard these whispers even upon the ship that bore me here.”

Kinvara’s face fell. She stepped away, sobering. “You forget, Sister, that even if we could orchestrate what you are proposing, there is little hope of convincing a host of freshly freed slaves to sail across the Narrow Sea to fight in a country that means next to nothing to them. And most of these slaves are not soldiers. They would do little good in a war.”

“Most of the slaves in Mereen were similarly unskilled, Sister, and yet they conquered their masters all the same.” Melisandre answered coolly. Kinvara’s face softened in agreement, but still looked unconvinced.

Melisandre smiled, some of her confidence leaking back in, realizing that her Sister did not know--had not seen the black tentacles of a kraken ensnaring the harpy flickering within the flames.

“To lead an army of former slaves to Westeros… this is not what I seek, Sister.” She walked to the table, pouring herself another cup, taking a sip, before looking back at the other woman. “Tell me, what have you heard of Euron Greyjoy?”

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“This ain’t half bad, you know.”

Jaime glanced acidly over his shoulder at his companion, currently gorging upon the stew that had been brought to them, seemingly as happy as a pig in shit. He lounged upon the bed of straw in the corner, legs crossed at the ankles. “Are you actually happy to be locked up down here?”

Bronn shrugged. “It’s not much better than our quarters.”

“Our quarters had a warm hearth, you oaf.” He shivered, pulling the ratty blanket that the guard
had provided them with tighter over his shoulders. “I don’t make for a good prisoner. Brings back some foul memories.”

“Aye, I suppose it does,” Bronn replied, twirling his spoon.

“You do know that we are awaiting a decision that will determine if we live or die?” Jaime spat, folding his arms over his knees. “You act as though we’ve simply gone for a picnic.”

“They aren’t going to kill you, Kingslayer. You and your armies are too valuable for all that.” He brushed a finger over the side of his bowl, sucking on it with a loud ‘pop’. “What kind of meat do you suppose that is, eh? Elk? Partridge?”

“I hardly think the Starks would waste good meat on the likes of us,” Jaime retorted coldly, leaning his shoulders against the icy stone wall at his back. Why anyone would choose to live in a place so cold was beyond him.

“You’re too gloomy for your own damn good, you know that?” Bronn asked, straightening from his position and turning toward him. He indicated their little dark cell with a wave of his hand. “This is just posturing. We’ll be out of here in a matter of days, just you wait.”

Jaime shook his head, wishing he could partake in some of his friend’s confidence. “You don’t know Jon Snow. And more importantly, you didn’t know his bloody father.” He sighed, throwing a stray bit of straw upon the floor. “The honorable Eddard Stark would have my head before you could blink for such a deception.”

“You’re forgetting something pretty damned important I think,” Bronn replied with a sniff. “The Dragon Queen. Seems that she’s really running the show.”

“You think Daenerys Targaryen will be our savior?” Jaime asked, almost disgusted by his friend’s ignorance. “You think the daughter of the man I stabbed in the back is going to plead for my life? That she would save the son of the man who ordered her family’s destruction?” He shook his head, looking away with a defeated laugh. “We have a better chance of being spirited away on the back of a dragon than that, my friend.”

Bonn looked chided at that, leaning back into his straw bed and the two men were silent for some time.
Jaime was very near drifting off to sleep when he heard footsteps coming down the hall. He blinked, hardly believing his ears, before scrambling to the bars, his heart thudding in his throat.

A tall, armored figure was coming toward their cell, bearing a torch in one hand and some sort of parcel under the other arm.

“Brienne?” he gasped as the figure finally came into the light, kneeling before him with wide, worried eyes. “Have you come to take us to the block already?”

She didn’t answer him, placing the parcel on the floor and unrolling it. She took out what appeared to be a fur and handed it over to him through the bars. “Here,” she said, cold and clipped.

He took it with a slow, doubtful hand. “Thank you, my friend,” he said confusedly, watching as she pulled out a flask and a loaf of bread from the package. “Is it your king and queen’s command that you see that I reside in comfort before they take my head?”

She paused, meeting his eyes once more. “The king and queen do not know I am here.”

He leaned away from the bars at that, palming the plush fur in his lap. “The honorable Brienne of Tarth, breaking an oath?” he asked, his wit kicking in as it so often did when faced with warring, troubling emotions. “What is the world coming to?”

“War,” she said simply, mouth a grim line.

“Got anything for me in there?” Bronn cut in, ambling up to the bars with his thumbs tucked into his belt.

“No,” Brienne snapped. She handed Jaime the flask. He unstoppered it and drank deeply. Arbor gold. Not his favorite, but it would do.

“Why are you here?” he finally said as Brienne settled cross-legged on the dirty ground.

“To save your life.”
Jaime sat, silent and stunned for a time. He looked around, as if searching for the trap surely hidden within the shadows. “You mean to break us free?”

“No.”

He scoffed. “Then, forgive me when I say I do not know how you could possibly be here to save my life if you do not aim to see me escape.”

“And what am I? Pond scum?” Bronn asked sourly.

“I have little concern for you, ser, but I think you know just as well as I that if Ser Jaime survives this, so will you. The king and queen could not care one flaming shit about you,” Brienne nearly growled, clearly angered that his crass companion would not simply shut up and leave them to it.

Bronn seemed to get the hint, rolling his eyes and flopping himself back down upon the straw bed without another word.

“You must request an audience with the king and queen,” Brienne began, turning her eyes back to him as if nothing had happened.

“You and I both saw what happens when I have an audience with Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen,” Jaime replied with a bitter scoff.

“This time, though, you won’t try to protect your wretched sister,” Brienne returned angrily, a grim line to her mouth that was as familiar to Jamie as the gold filigree of his replaced hand.

Jaime nearly laughed, the idea staggering to him. “Is that what you think I was doing?”

“Yes.”

He shook his head, bringing the flask to his lips again. “You don’t know me very well, then, lady Brienne.”
“I know you just as well as you do yourself. Perhaps better,” she shot back, her eyes flaring. He had almost forgotten how blue they were-- like a summer sky. “Whatever you have been telling yourself, it is false. It’s no wonder you’re down here, locked in a cell, with that paltry defense you delivered.”

He peered at her from under his brow, affronted. “I did not think it so paltry,” he muttered.

“Cersei still has her claws in you,” she said, leaning closer to him. “They are too deep for you to even see it, but it’s the truth.”

“She’s right, you know,” Bronn interrupted from his repose on the straw.

“Do you mind?,” Jaime shot back over his shoulder. He turned back to Brienne with a helpless lift of his shoulders. “And what if I request this audience?” he asked, narrowing his eyes. “What can I say to them that would possibly save my head that I have not already offered?”

“Information. As much as you can spill from your mind, give it to them.” She shifted, shoulders twitching as her eyes fell. “No one knows her as well as you do. Any information you have that may lead to a peaceful end to this war would be rewarded.”

Jaime looked glumly to the floor, watching a roach crawl between his feet from under the rushes. “I may have known Cersei once, but lately she has been as unknowable as the sun to me.”

“Be that as it may,” Brienne gritted, clearly done with his melancholy. “You will request an audience and you will offer up whatever you know. Her council, her habits, her passions and desires, details of all the people who surround her. Her favorite foods, when she sleeps, eats and shits. All of it.” She paused, leaning closer to him once more, catching his downturned eyes. “Lest you forget, the king and queen have a Spider and a Faceless Man in their employ. Even the most minute detail could be of use.”

Jaime breathed out a long, helpless breath. “Lest you forget, my lady, my family has made certain that friends could never be made of Starks or Targaryens.”

“Your bloody brother is Hand to the Queen!” Brienne spat. She leaned away, cursing, all patience run dry. “Do you remember Harrenhal?”
Jaime peered at her quizzically. “Of course I remember Harrenhal.”

“Do you remember what you told me? About how you got the name ‘Kingslayer’?”

Jaime nodded mutely, unsure of where this was leading to.

“I do not know Daenerys Targaryen well, but I do know one thing about her: she will avoid the loss of innocents at almost any cost.” She paused, throat working, her mouth wavering over what might have been a fond smile as she straightened, swelling with pride. “If you told her what you told me that day, I do not doubt that she would come to forgive you, in time.”

Jaime simply stared, something strange and heavy taking up space in his chest, snatching his voice from him like a crow with a shiny coin.

Brienne sighed, coming heavily to her feet. “The king and queen will not kill you with their own blade, my friend. But without an audience, you will remain in this dark cell until the war is at our door. What do you think will happen to you and your companion if the castle is overrun?”

Jaime swallowed, tongue clicking, throat suddenly dry as sun bleached bone.

She turned to go, gathering her parcel and the torch from the floor. She looked at him over her shoulder, eyes sad, loving. “I will tell the turnkey to bring you before the king and queen first thing tomorrow, so that you may confess and plead for mercy.”

She turned, striding away without another word.

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“I’m sorry, Your Grace,” Gendry muttered for perhaps the dozenth time in as many minutes.

“If you apologize again, my lord, I will give you true reason to be sorry,” Dany snapped, patience wearing thin. When they had arrived from the Wolfswood, Gendry had sought them out, informing
the king that his ‘wedding gift’ was ready. She had hoped for some solitude, perhaps a bath, but Jon’s eyes had lit up with such excitement, she could not deny him.

It did not mean she was very happy about it.

For the past quarter of an hour she had stood behind a screen in her chamber with Gendry pulling on straps and lacing and buckles with clumsy fingers, nerves getting the best of him. Dany couldn’t well blame him, as he was dressing a queen that had dragons at her beck and call and a rather lethal husband. Missandei stood beside her, to maybe ease his fretting with another woman present, but it seemed to have little effect.

“What in the Hells is taking so long?” Jon called irritably from the other side of the screen. “Has our Lord Gendry suddenly been struck blind?”

“I am more accustomed to making armor, Your Grace, not fitting it,” Gendry shot back, equally testy. “Perhaps you should come and help instead of shouting complaints?”

She heard Jon give a great huff and she smiled inwardly, recalling the warning she had delivered to him earlier. She wanted him to be surprised with the vision of her wearing it, since he had gone to the trouble of surprising her with such a handsome gift.

After Gendry had laid the armor upon a sheet on the bed, she had stared for what seemed an age. It was as black as obsidian, glittering like the shiny hull of a beetle within the lamplight. She remembered Viserys telling her about Rhaegar’s armor, the last of its kind, gleaming and splendid and terrible to behold. Her brother often talked of having a suit made in its image, once he took the throne.

She couldn’t help but feel some small flare of victory, of sadness, seeing the creation before her in that moment.

Gendry tied off the last lashing of her mail shirt, giving her a smile, and she stepped from behind the screen.

Her previously grumpy husband looked awed, ready to fall to his knees before her. He stepped toward her, a dark and hungry light kindling in his eyes. It was an expression she knew well. One that never failed to make her belly clench.
“Does it please, Your Grace?” Gendry piped up nervously from behind her, the other two occupants of the room nearly forgotten. “It is to your and your sister’s design almost perfectly, though, I could not—“

“Leave us,” Jon nearly growled, never taking his eyes from her.

Gendry did not catch on, stepping closer, the burning desire of a craftsman curious about the quality of his product making him blind and deaf to subtext. “Is it not what you wanted, my lord?” he asked, looking back toward her, his eyes roving over his handiwork. “Is it the pauldrons?” he asked as he stepped towards her, tugging at the item in question. “I did make them a bit smaller than what you asked—“

“Gendry, Seven Hells—“

“It’s exquisite, my lord,” Dany interrupted magnanimously, before her besotted husband could proceed with his tirade. “Truly, but shall we talk more of it in the morning? The king and I are quite exhausted.”

Gendry nodded, not looking pleased of these plans, but lingered no further, leaving the room with Missandei close behind.

“You’re the most beautiful damned thing I’ve ever seen.”

Dany’s lips quirked up in a knowing smile, her eyebrows raising as he started to pace around her like a shadow cat circling a fat doe. “It’s a funny thing,” she said lightly. “None of my pretty dresses seem to have been able to stir you in such a way.”

He said nothing, stepping closer to her, brushing fingers over the curve of the pauldron, callous scraping dryly over the burnished metal.

The armor was simple by modern Westerosi standards—no hammered sigils or flowery designs, but the plate was beautifully fluted, curved edges flowing and weaving through the metal, the scales of a dragon. It was a modified suit, the only plate being about her shoulders, chest, forearms, and thighs. She wore a mail shirt and a padded tunic under it all, with black leather trousers, calf-high black doeskin boots, and gloves made of sealskin. The gloves had been a gift from Tormund, praising their water imperviousness and claiming that they could find grip on a “sheer wall of ice.” She supposed it would do just as well on dragon’s spikes.
“If I did not know any better,” she continued with a smirk, well used to his silences by now, “the fearsome Jon Snow might just hold some… strong affections for the warrior woman,” she teased as he tugged at a strapping, ensuring its stoutness.

“Fierce women do weaken me, Your Grace, it is true,” he said, his voice dark and simmering like a fresh ember spitting from the hearth, sending her blood alight. “One in particular.”

She smiled, pleased, before she grew thoughtful, perhaps a bit curious. “Your wildling girl,” she ventured carefully. He had only mentioned her in passing, his face shuttered and mouth downturned, a subject best avoided. She did not need to ask what had happened to her. Jon Snow was every bit a wolf as he was a dragon, and wolves mated for life. “She was a fierce woman?”

He was kneeling near her feet, checking the fastenings of her cuirass. He stilled in his fretting. “Aye… I suppose you have to be, to live that far North.” He looked up at her, amusement playing in his eyes that she found extraordinarily surprising. “She tried to kill me.”

She barked a shocked laugh. “Kill you?” she asked. “Pray, husband, what did you do to offend your lover so? Am I going to be driven to thoughts of murder as well?”

He straightened from his crouch slowly, looking at her with an old and distant shame. “I betrayed her. I posed as a defector, gathering information for the Night’s Watch. Eventually, she had to learn the truth.”

She smiled sadly, bringing a hand to his whiskered cheek. He was looking away from her, lost amid painful memory. “Promise me, husband, that your damnable honor will not see you murdered, attempted or no, again.”

He laughed quietly, a bit sad, a bit shocked. “I am a man of my word, Daenerys. Which means I can only say that I’ll try my best.”

The mood turned, and they gazed at each other for a moment longer, the dread tidings gathering outside the warmth and quiet of their chamber falling in around them like a heavy cloud.

Finally, he heaved a great breath and stepped away from her. “You should walk about,” he told her with a wave of his hand. “Make sure it’s comfortable, that your movements aren’t constrained.”
She nodded, doing as he suggested. She had to admit that even the relatively lighter Valyrian steel still felt strange on her shoulders. She was unaccustomed to anything heavier than a fur-lined dress. Besides, the mail was of conventional steel, weighing her down considerably.

“How does it feel?” Jon asked, watching her intently.

“It feels… well it feels a bit queer, if I’m being honest,” she replied as she crouched into a position approximating her seat upon Drogon’s back.

“You’ll grow stronger,” Jon reassured, his lips twitching with an affectionate grin. “The weight will feel like nothing in less than a fortnight.”

“You had to have had this creation commissioned before you left for Castle Black,” she pointed out as she bent over to touch her toes.

He nodded. “Aye, I did.”

“And yet it is a wedding present.”

“Aye.”

She suppressed a pleased smile, frankly overcome by her husband’s unwavering kindness, the constant consideration for her and her safety. He would not keep her from battle, she knew, but he would do everything within his power to see that she survived the fight. “It must have cost you a fortune.”

He shook his head. “Gendry refused payment. Said he owed you more than some ‘fancy armor’.” He looked at her, intense and loving. “As we all do.”

She lowered her eyes, pacing back toward him. “He’s a good man.”

Something queer shadowed her husband’s face then, his eyes turning worried. “He is also Robert
Baratheon’s bastard.”

Her feet halted and she looked over at him, astonished. She uttered a shocked curse, speech unthinkingly turning to Dothraki. Jon turned his head to the side, curious. She breathed a small laugh. “It seems that his father would likely be rolling in his grave, knowing what his bastard son has been up to these past few months.”

Jon smiled, maybe just a bit relieved. “Aye, that he would.”

Silence reigned again. She continued her path back to him, standing taught and tense before the night-black window. A storm was kicking up beyond, the wind rattling the glass in the panes. It made him jumpy, focus turning outward. Storms were the harbinger of more dread things than snow drifts and fallen trees to him now.

“I wonder, my lord…” she began slowly, stepping closer to him, tucking her fingers under the opening of his leather hauberk and tugging slightly. Bringing him back to her. “You wish to see me protected with mail and plate, and yet you do not afford the same protections for yourself.”

He shook his head. “I am unused to fighting with plate and mail.” He smiled at her, knowing and amused. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I am not the largest man.”

She bit her lip, remembering the weak dismissal of her growing affections she had offered Tyrion back on Dragonstone. So long ago it seemed to her now. A time where he believed he had leave to march into danger without her.

“Since I cannot rely on power alone like Clegane or Lady Brienne, I must rely on quickness,” he continued.

She recalled the brief glimpses she had caught of his swordsmanship on that frozen lake—spinning and parrying, striking with all the swiftness of an adder. “I will defer to your judgement on this husband, as I know little of swordplay, but I will point out that Valyrian steel is much lighter than conventional metals.”

His mouth twitched, eyes soft and fond. “You would make a true Targaryen out of me.”

“And why not?” she asked, lifting her eyebrows. “You are one, after all.”
“Aye,” he said, his eyes flashing with something that could have been pain. He turned his face to the floor, stepping away from her, clearing his throat. “Is everything suitable with your armor?” he asked, obviously hedging.

She reclaimed the step he had gained from her. “You are Targaryen, Jon, no matter what surname you cling to. Whatever you may tell yourself.”

He looked back at her sadly. “You know that I cannot take up my proper name now.” He waved a helpless hand. “It is not the right time.”

“I know,” she replied lowly, “but I wonder if there will ever come a proper time, for you.”

He looked up to the ceiling, blinking rapidly, sighing. “We cannot speak of this now.”

“We can and we will,” she responded firmly.

His shoulders fell, knowing the fight was lost before it truly began. He nodded, walking to the desk, mindlessly fidgeting with a scroll. He was silent for a time, eyes drifting to and fro, gathering his thoughts. She waited, hands folded in front of her.

“I always wanted to be a Stark—” he finally began, halting and quiet, “but I knew, even if I accepted some false king’s promise of legitimacy, that it would be a hollow gift. A bribe for fealty. One unearned and ingenuine.” He sighed heavily, the matter obviously well tended to by his troubled thoughts. “I started to… to come to peace with my name.” He met her eyes, a tiny smile playing on his lips. “Your Hand once told me to wear my name like armor, so it may never be used to hurt me.”

She laughed quietly, stepping closer, leaning a hip against the edge of the desk. “And then I met a stubborn, fiery, passionate, loving woman with a grand purpose and three dragons,” he looked at her adoringly, lifting a hand to stroke at her hair. “And her name was Targaryen.” He leaned closer to her, kissing her scarred brow. “The Stark name has haunted me, more than aided me, all my life. I would be… proud, to take up the name of my perfect wife.”

She struggled with her composure for a moment, blinking against the heat in her eyes. She felt a welter of something fierce and protective swell behind her stuttering heart. “And do you not think I could say the same of you, husband?”
He stared at her, struck dumb for a moment. "'Snow'?" he asked flatly, clearly thinking it was some sort of jape. He shook his head, his laugh small and bitter. "That is a brand you do not want, my queen."

She stepped away, her limbs a bit numb, the idea striking her like a poison dart-- spreading swiftly through vein and tendon. She looked to the floor, her mind a rolling fury. "And why not?" she questioned. "Is it not customary for a wife to take the name of her husband?"

He frowned, shaking his head again. "Well… yes, but monarchs have more latitude with that sort of thing… Cersei never took up the Baratheon name. Besides..." he heaved a great breath, "'Snow' is not a name to wish for."

"My king is so named," she returned hotly, striding closer, chin tilted in defiance. "And he is worth twice the whole lot of the men with great names that I have ever encountered."

He stepped closer to her, eyes battling between bewilderment and consternation. "Daenerys, we must think of the child. What of them? They would be--"

"The son or daughter of the king and queen of the Seven Kingdoms," she shot back, her blood brimming, her fists clenching at her sides. She felt odd, like a she-wolf baring her teeth, as if he were beset on all sides and she was the last defense between him and a sure and swift death.

She took in a calming breath, determined to make him see just how extraordinary he was. "I came here to break the wheel, Jon-- to see the spokes of great houses that have rolled over the common folk for near a millenia broken to splinters."

He nodded, a fond smile twitching at the corner of his lips, though he still looked faintly confused. "Aye, and you shall do it."

She straightened her spine, smiling at him with a hint of deviousness. "So tell me, husband, what better way to achieve this than breaking the wheel with a name meant to disparage? A name meant to remind the smallfolk of what they were-- that they did not belong in mighty castles and great halls?"

Something quite fierce… perhaps even proud kindled in his black eyes at that. She almost felt as if he would stride forth and kiss her… but he sobered, his shoulders pulling taught, eyes falling as he
shook his head. “You wanted to set me aside, Daenerys, for the good of your name, to see the continuation of your house,” he said quietly, a hint of blackness edging his voice. She felt the words sting her good as barbs. “And now the heir to your name-- our name, resides within you, and you now wish to cast it aside?” He looked back up at her, brow wrinkled in pained question. “For a name given to bloody bastards?”

She pulled her lips over her teeth, the mean truth in his words making her feel a potent rush of shame that made her look away. She finally bowed her head, gathering herself. “You speak truly, my love, and for that, I cannot blame you.” She stepped closer to him, searching his lovely face, lined with an old anger, a distant shame. She brushed a stray curl behind his ear. “But answer me one thing, husband: would you take up the Targaryen name because it was mine, or because you believed it to be yours?”

She felt, rather than heard, the shaky breath that escaped him then, as if she had struck him. He hung his head, throat working against words of protest that would not come.

She squeezed his shoulder in comfort, knowing what torment he must be going through. She took a tiny step closer, fully in his space, her brow pressed to his own. “When I was in Essos… all I had was my name.” She shook her head, swallowing hard against painful memory. “Penniless and friendless, it was the only thing that saved my brother and me… for a time. But… I became who I am because of my marriage to the Khal. Tell me, my love, do you think he married me because I was a Targaryen?”

Jon pulled away, looking at her sadly, before shaking his head.

She stepped away from him, gazing blankly into the flame of a candle upon the desk. “No one in Essos cared for Targaryens or any other great house… but I clung to it out of habit, out of comfort… it was the only true possession I had. And the only Targaryen I ever knew… he was cruel and foolish and weak.”

“He was only one man,” Jon cut in brokenly, his voice rough as brambles. “The Targaryens are still a great house, Daenerys.”

She nodded, her thoughts running amok within her. “Yes, they were. For a long while.” She walked to the hearth, feeling queer and cold. “You’ve heard of Barristan Selmy? Barristan the Bold, he was called.”

Jon nodded. “Of course,” he said as he walked closer to her. “He was one of the finest swordsman to ever live.”
“He served me in Mereen. He gave me sage council, before his tragic end… but he did tell me one lie during his service to me. He once told me that the great houses would of Westeros would flock to my name. That the Targaryen name was still loved and feared in my homeland. Ser Jorah was the only one to tell me truly-- that the houses would flock to the side they thought would win.”

He swallowed, the truth sinking in, turning in his mind like mill wheel.

“The Stark name was not enough to see your brother safe, even under guest right. The Stark name was not enough to keep your home and siblings unmolested. And likewise, the Targaryen name brought me nothing but catspaws and betrayal.” She shook her head, leaning her hand upon the mantle as she watched the flames dance and flow within the hearth. “Why cling to this... poison edifice of name and blood that created the very world we aim to destroy?” She turned back to him, where he stood as limp and bereft as a nearly drowned man in the surf. His eyes were slanted with something overwhelming and terrible, something that sent such a wash of love and hope over her she nearly reeled.

She managed a shaky step toward him, looking him in the face, braver than she felt. “Your name kept you safe, your name brought you to me. And that makes it worth more than any Targaryen, Baratheon, or all the others.”

He was silent for a long while, struck still and silent by something immense that she could not reckon with. His lovely face was cast in orange and black, making him seem some creature of light and shadow. His eyes were nothing more than pinpricks of gold within a depthless dark. Finally, he stepped forward, his hands worrying at the buckles at her pauldrons.

“I don’t know what I did,” he said so quietly she almost missed it as he pulled off a pauldron and set it upon the couch behind him. “I don’t know how any man could earn a woman like you, but if I think on it for much longer I may go mad.”

She lifted her hands to rest at his elbows, wanting to tell him the same, to list the ways he continually astonished her, brought her to her knees with love and wonder, but she couldn’t possibly hold the words on her tongue.

“At any rate,” he mumbled as he untied the lacings of her mail shirt. “Best get you out of this armor so I can bring you to bed.”

She managed a smile before her lips were captured with his own, her mail falling away with a loud
thud upon the floor.

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“We must speak of it.”

They had remained silent for some time, happy to lose themselves in each other’s bodies, to languish in the tide of solitude. Perhaps the last opportunity they would be afforded for a long while. Words only brought dread and darkness in, it seemed. Words only forming the signposts to the narrow and treacherous path that had been paved before their feet. He had thought perhaps she had nodded off, lulled to sleep by a thorough undoing, but it seemed that she was plagued by the same restlessness as he.

He shifted, arm going tingly under her weight. He pulled the furs further up their bodies, slicked with sweat and repletion, the fire guttering within the hearth and too weak to banish the cold winds that leaked through.

“We have a council meeting in the morning,” she reminded him sternly through the gathering dark, taking his silence as a rebuke.

“I know…” he muttered, “though…” he trailed off lamely, not able to put a name to all he was feeling.

She lifted her head, chin resting on his collar bone. He could see her eyes glinting like hidden tidal pools in the shadows of their chamber. “Speak your mind, Jon Snow.”

“I would have thought… with the child...” His hand slid to the still flat plane of her belly, wondering if he would be able to feel something… some flutter of tiny feet, a flicker of a heart beat. He knew little of children and the process of growing one. His profound ignorance of the matter only aided in heightening his foreboding.

Her head shifted, looking away, hand stilling upon his chest, where it had been circling mindlessly, fingers twirling through the coarse hair there. “If I do not fight, there will be no world for our child to be born into.”

“I know,” he returned heavily. “In my mind… I know. My heart speaks differently.”
“The mind and the heart are often at odds.”

“You speak many truths tonight, my lady,” he said with the barest hint of a laugh.

She returned his laugh in kind. “The council will be equally reluctant to accept our plans, I think.”

He sighed, curling his fingers into her hip in what he hoped was an encouraging way. “Tyrion strikes me as the best choice. He has a knack for it. He may detest everything else about it, but he would... adjust.”

“He is quite good at adapting,” she replied blithely. She turned her face toward him again, fingers resuming their circling, this time just above the ridge over his heart. “Lady Sansa seems to be an equally wise choice, my love.”

Jon nodded, reaching over with his free hand to tangle his fingers with her own. He sighed sadly. “Aye... but she and Tyrion hold little love for one another. I fear she may hate me... forcing her to work with someone she dislikes so.”

“If it comes to that, husband,” she said pointedly, lifting herself on one arm to look at him directly. “Your sister could never come to hate you.” She stroked a fond hand over his jaw. He could just make out the loving smile she gave him through the dim light. “Besides, I think you overestimate the animosity your sister has for my Hand. They would make a fearsome pair, if such a thing were to happen.”

He nodded, feeling heartened at that, though the darkness within him weighed heavy indeed. “And of the other plans?” he asked quietly, tucking a stray hair behind her hair. “We are certain of those?”

She turned her face, placing a careful kiss on the saddle of his thumb. “Yes, my king,” she replied breathlessly. “You stay with Winterfell, I stay in the air.”

“And you never land that bloody dragon unless you see the signal.”

He felt, rather than saw her tiny nod. “But if Winterfell should be overrun...” she whispered.
“We flee together, for good or ill.”

“No heroic gestures.”

He smiled, painful, his vision splintering. “No heroic gestures.” His thumb stroked her jaw, flowed to her shoulder, down to her belly once more. “It is not just me anymore.”

She leaned forward, lips hovering a hairsbreadth from his own. “It’s not just us anymore,” she corrected, before he could capture her breath for himself.

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He tore into his chicken, having been sustained on oatcakes and the stringy elk jerky these Northerners were so bloody fond of for the better part of a fort night.

He was wholly content, despite the morning chill of the hall. He was finally alone-- with ale and chicken and even a heel of bread. Brienne and Jorah were on guard duty until this evening, and the Great Hall was blessedly empty and quiet. All he had for company were the servants preparing the council table for the meeting later that morning.

Until Arya Stark slid onto the bench next to him, as silent as a cat.

He flinched. “Seven Hells,” he growled after he had gathered himself. “What do you think you’re doing? Sneaking up on a man like me is dangerous.”

Arya shrugged, her eyes cold and calculating, almost bored. The Hound looked her over-- despite the new clothes, she seemed much the same… although perhaps a bit more… advanced. As if the last time he had seen her she was nothing more than a bear cub, and now she was almost a full grown sow, snarling over a fresh kill.

“Thought I’d say hello to an old friend,” she greeted breezily, pulling a plate of bacon towards her. He had been planning on saving it, but he decided it was best to not grumble about it. It was, practically speaking, her bloody bacon, after all.
He grunted in reply, tearing into his chicken once more. “I’m not your friend, girl.” He looked over at her, shifting his elbows on the table and tilting his chin up at her. “Am I still on that fucking list of yours?”

“No,” she answered flatly, “Thought I had killed you already.” She sniffed and wiped her greasy fingers on her breeches, quite unladylike. Old habits die hard, he guessed, and spending months on end in his rough company probably did little to enhance elegant habits… if she had any in the first place. He seriously doubted it. “Doesn’t mean you won’t get put back on it, though. Just need cause.”

“Oh, cause, is it?” The Hound grunted, gulping his ale and wiping his mouth. “Is that what you’re waiting for? What about your bloody butcher’s boy?”

Her eyes flashed, mouth creasing into a thin line. She looked away, chewing contemplatively on her bacon. “If my brother ever ordered you to run down a kill an innocent boy, would you do it?”

“Aye,” he answered meanly with a shake of his head. He picked a stray bit of meat out his teeth. “But that is why I serve your brother, and not some dumb cunt. He’d never give an order like that and you bloody well know it.”

“I don’t trust you,” Arya said sourly after a brief consideration, nibbling on another piece of bacon as if she didn’t really want it. He really wished she wouldn’t. That was good meat she was wasting. “I never have… and now you’re sworn to protect my brother.”

“Is that why you’re always hanging around in the shadows with that fucking sword of yours?” The Hound spat hotly, his patience run thoroughly dry. “You think I’m going to try to kill your fucking brother?”

“I don’t know what I think.”

“Listen here, girl,” he began angrily, turning more fully towards her on the bench. “I protected Joff’s worthless hide well enough. I think I’ll do just as well protecting your precious brother.” He drained his ale, slamming it down upon the table. “I guess he’s failed to tell you that he saved my worthless hide as well as I saved his precious one a time or two beyond The Wall.”

Arya simply stared at him, looking at least a bit reassured by this information, though trying her
best to hide it. “I don’t think you’ll betray my brother… willingly at any rate,” she finally allowed, pouring herself a cup of ale.

“Is that right?” he returned thickly through a mouthful of bread, thoroughly soured on her company now that she was thieving good ale and throwing accusations. “You seem confident in that. Too confident.”

She glanced sharply at him over her cup. “I’ve seen you around fire, Dog,” she replied coldly. “What do you think you’re apt to do? When the very world is aflame? You are aware that fire kills the dead and we have two dragons to do it?”

He paused, looking at her as impassively as he could manage as he ran his tongue over his teeth. He could not deny that she spoke the truth. It was a thought he had to confront almost daily. Fire, his mortal enemy, now delivered as the world’s only salvation.

“I’ll make do,” he finally returned, voice dark, pitched in promise he did not know if he fully felt.

The girl paused, searching his face for falsehood, deceit-- traits he was not adept at. He knew that she knew that, but she looked unconvinced all the same. She placed her horn down on the table, eyes shifting away, the matter seemingly settled.

He sat, numb and silent in the wake of her heavy damnation. He was not surprised that she should deem him a coward, that she should be worried for the sure safety of her brother, being guarded by a man whose worst fear was the very same instrument of their yearned-for victory. He nodded at her sword belt. If he was not to be rid of her, he might as well change the subject. “You gotten any better with that thing?”

A small, wicked smile snaked onto her lips at that. It was so familiar to him he nearly laughed. “We could go out into the yard and you could see for yourself.”

He shook his head. “Oh no, no, girl. I’ll not take a knife to the throat because I knocked the king’s sister into the mud.”

“You assume too much.”

This time he could not resist the laughter. “Aye… wouldn’t be the first time.”
She managed a little chuckle herself, her shoulders lowering just a touch. “I suppose it is a good thing I didn’t kill you.”

“For you, or for me?”

“For Jon,” she replied coolly, pouring herself another horn of ale. She took a careful sip before looking over at him, eyes questioning. “How did you survive? I thought for sure that you’d die out there… maybe not for days, but… I was certain.”

“I’m a tough bastard to kill,” he answered, not quite meeting her eyes. She stared at him, silent and waiting. His shoulders slumped, irritated and defeated in equal measure. “Some crazy fool of a septon found me. Not sure how long I’d been out there. Had to start shooing the buzzards away before too long.” He leaned over the table, eyes roving over the pits and grooves of the old wood planks beneath his hands. “He saved me… though I wasn’t worth saving. And now I’m here, and the septon is dead.” He looked up at her and there was something queer and unidentifiable inhabiting her face. “I’m glad you finally made it home, girl. I knew you would, eventually.”

A slow, reluctant smile wound over her mouth, before she looked away, growing glum. “Aye, I made it home, reunited with what little family I have left, and now a threat that the world hasn’t seen in millennia marches upon it and everyone I’ve ever loved.” She looked down to her ale, spinning the horn between forefinger and thumb in idle worry. “Do you know why there is a council meeting today?”

“The scouts have started not coming back,” he answered solemnly. “The hunters are reporting that there is no game to hunt, no animals at all. And the Kingslayer wishes to beg for his hide.”

“The dead are close,” she said quietly.

“Aye.” He grew silent, unmoving, his eyes drifting very far away, mind wandering to that spit of stone in a frozen lake. Hemmed in at all sides by soldiers who never tired, guarded and hunted by men with lidless eyes and silent mouths. He felt something snap within him, some nameless rage of thinking of them … marching forth only to add the very world to their number. He knocked a fist upon the table with a muttered oath. “I hate sitting here, waiting for it like a fucking sow waits for the knife.”

Arya glanced over at him, smiling strangely, as if regarding an old friend. “It seems we have one thing in common, at least.”
“It’s an incredible sight, is it not?”

Sansa turned her head over her shoulder, watching the Hand of the queen marching towards her, cloak billowing in the cruel evening wind.

She turned back to gaze over the snow-capped parapet. The moors of the North rolled ceaseless and white as wax below, lit by fires innumerable. Veined with glowing amber lines, like a fire opal under the sun. “It is comforting, in a way.”

Tyrion slowed to a stop beside her, craning his neck, only just able to catch sight of what she was seeing from his vantage. “It is, I suppose, in a macabre sort of way.”

“So many lives,” she whispered in reply, eyes roving. It really was a grand sight. She only hoped that they had done enough. The world was bisected before her, one side bathed in light, the other in shadow-- the realm of dead, theirs for the taking.

“You’ve done well by them, my lady,” Tyrion returned with a tilt of his head. “They will be well protected.”

She turned to walk further down the wall, knowing that her unannounced companion would follow. “It’s more people than I’ve ever seen in my life,” she said slowly, peering over her shoulder, unable to keep her eyes away from it. She slowed to a stop, looking at her hands folded before her. “My father used to say that being a lord was more than just fancy feasts and parties… that it was as if you had thousands of children. Children who all need and deserve your protection.”

Tyrion was silent beside her, blinking against the harsh flicker of a nearby torch. “Does this frighten you, my lady?”

“Of course it frightens me.” She looked to her hands again, turning the little roll of parchment between her fingers-- the white seal of a direwolf paired with the red wax of a Dragon unbroken upon it.
“It frightens me as well,” Tyrion replied with a heavy sigh. He leaned his elbows upon the lowered wall of a parapet, squinting into the glimmering darkness. “I’ve grown rather fond of ruling over the years, but... it is one thing to rule alongside a powerful monarch-- a face and name to hide behind… and when the world isn’t at the brink of cataclysm, of course.” He glanced at her, a comforting smile flashing over his mouth. “It won’t come to that, my lady… I’m sure of it.”

“But if it does?” she returned coldly. “We shall be rulers, you and I.”

Tyrion looked to his boots, a tiny, proud smile lighting his face. “I should never wish for a better partner, my lady.”

“You seem rather confident in my ability,” she said. “I do not have the experience that you do.”

He shifted, coming to look at her more fully. “Experience is admirable, my lady, but not everything. My own father gave me command of King’s Landing with only a paltry amount of experience under my belt, and he hated my very existence.”

Sansa couldn’t help but smile, though it failed almost as quickly as it came. They were silent for some time, looking upon the strange, alien world that spread below them.

“I cannot help but feel that they are not telling us something,” Sansa finally said within a heavy, knowing sigh.

Tyrion glanced over at her in tacit agreement. “A feeling I have grown quite accustomed to, I’m afraid.”

“So you agree?” Her companion said nothing, only turning his gaze back out to the moors. “What do you think it could be?”

Tyrion let out a defeated huff, leaning away from the wall and taking a step closer to her. “There are many things I could say, each more unlikely than the last.”

“And which would be the most likely by your esteemed estimation, my lord?”
He shook his head, looking away from her again. “Best not dwell on rumor and suspicion, my lady. Especially with war so close to our door.”

She bit back an angry protest, turning to the parapet once more in defeat. “I wish he would tell me.” She shook her head, aghast that tears should heat her eyes. “I wish he would trust me.”

There was a long bout of silence. She heard Tyrion shift closer, felt his careful fingers wound within her own, clenched at her side. She did not flinch away. “Do you think he would name you his heir, my lady, if he did not trust you?”

She let out a ragged breath, attempting to banish the shadow that beset her now. “No,” she bit out, “but… but I don’t think he trusts me fully…” She took in a shaky breath, the frigid night air anchoring her, even if just a fraction. “For good reason.”

There was another lengthy pause. Tyrion squeezed her fingers before freeing them, stepping to look out at the wildness below once more. “I am all too familiar with what plagues you now, my lady,” he said quietly. “Do you know of how I came into Daenerys Targaryen’s service?”

She shook her head. He gave her a sad, flickering smile before continuing. “Varys spirited me away, after I killed my father. There were many bumps and bruises along the way… but, eventually I found myself in a foreign city I thought I’d never see, before a queen I thought I’d never meet.” He laughed bitterly, folding his hands upon the parapet before him, eyes growing distant. “Before I met her… I believed in nothing. I had only one desire… to drink myself into an early grave on the finest wine the Seven Kingdoms had to offer… and others besides.”

Sansa laughed sardonically at that. “I think you may be aiming for that goal still, my lord.”

He smiled at her, humored. “Can you blame me, Lady Sansa?” he asked with a wave of his arms. “Some advisors are not so stout as others in the face of such dread tidings.” Sansa smirked at him, shaking her head, and he went on, as easy as ever. “She had every reason to distrust me. For all intents and purposes, she had every reason to cleave my head clean from my shoulders.” He breathed out a long, tired breath. “But, she took a chance on a kinslaying dwarf from the family that aided in the destruction of her house… and less than a fortnight later, I was left with the fell duty of quelling civil war within the walls of a city I knew nothing about. Even when she came back… when she witnessed the fruits of my labor… she still doubted.”

He paused, fumbling with something upon his jerkin, before he handed it to her silently. She took it, the sigil of the Hand of the queen gleaming all too familiar within the torches. “And yet… she presented me with this.”
She turned the medallion over within her hand, feeling its weight, both real and figurative, press into her palm. She swallowed. “Thank you, my lord,” she finally returned, voice tight with a gratitude that was real and weighty. She held the pin back to him and he applied it back to his shirt quickly, as if he had missed it.

“You have nothing to fear,” he whispered, stepping closer. “It will not come to that… and if it does… well… we are certainly adept at impossible situations, you and I.”

She smiled. It was small and weighted with worry and endless troubles, to be sure, but it was real. “Shall we continue, my lord?” she asked after a brief pause, both parties acknowledging the strength in the other. “There are supplies and defenses to be checked.”

Tyrion smiled brightly at her, pride kindling behind his eyes before he gave her a shallow bow. “Aye, my lady. Let us go.”

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“You’re moving too much.”

Arya spun on her heel, sword held before her as she peered into the predawn gloom of the yard. 

Jon stepped into the dim, grey light, looking rumpled and wrung out. He had left his cloak behind, and it made him look strangely smaller-- more vulnerable. Less a king and more like the brother she had wished for in all those days and nights on the run.

Her shoulders relaxed, and she managed a small smile as she twirled her sword, holding it upright behind her back. “Harder to hit a moving target.”

He grinned, looking to the frosty ground, but said nothing, walking toward her slowly.

“Seems a bit early for a king to be wandering about,” she pointed out, taking a seat on a nearby bench, tapping the tip of Needle upon an abandoned buckler at her feet. “Or is it late?”
“Both,” Jon answered as he came to sit next to her, leaning his elbows on his thighs. His breath puffed before him, little wisps of ephemeral cloud. He looked down at his hands. “Could say the same for you.”

“Don’t sleep much anymore.”

Her brother looked over at her, dark eyes sad and knowing. “Me either.”

She looked away, twirling the pommel of her sword, her nerves gripped with a sudden anxiousness. It had been so very long… they had been reunited for over two weeks now, but she was coming to realize they had never truly talked since then. They had been fast friends, a lifetime ago, now, and she would always love him, but… she wondered if they really knew each other anymore.

She blew out a long breath, the thought chilling her more than the winter air. “Why can’t you sleep?”

“Many reasons,” he answered, looking to his hands. “The Kingslayer is to be freed, the undead march upon my home… but, one in particular. I am to execute Lord Glover in only a few hours.”

Arya nodded, having nearly forgotten the traitorous pile of horse shit that was the Lord Glover. “I don’t see why you should lose sleep over that,” she said with a sniff. “He is only reaping what he sowed.” She looked over at Jon, a feral grin making its way onto her face. “It should be a happy thing, executing a man who plotted against you and the queen, destined for the block.”

Jon gazed at her, worry lining his face. He looked so much older, the weight of a realm laid heavy and cumbersome upon his shoulders. “I take no joy in killing.”

“I do,” she replied coldly, gazing out into the yard, remembering the way Walder Frey had kicked and twitched beneath her hands, how Meryn Trant had mewled and begged for death. Oh, how she savored those awful sounds like a favorite melody. “There is nothing sweeter than killing those that have wronged you. Those that have hurt the ones you love.”

She looked over at him and his expression was lost, aggrieved, as if he sat before a stranger-- his worst fears confirmed. And perhaps hers as well. He blinked, turning away. “Blood for blood may sound like some great thing, Arya, but blood for blood only means that eventually there will be no more blood left to spill.”
She felt something cruel and terrible inch up her spine. “You weren’t there, Jon,” she said darkly. She came to her feet, pacing before him, twirling Needle in her hand, a comforting idleness. “You weren’t there, at the Sept of Baelor, when Joffrey called for father’s head. You weren’t there, to see Robb’s body paraded through a mob... I was.” She stopped, looking over at him, where he sat with slumped shoulders and a creased brow. “There is nothing sweeter than death.”

Jon looked up at her, something queer flaring in his eyes. “Aye, you’re right. I was not there. But do not speak to me of death, Arya. That is one thing you have not seen.”

She felt her heart sink at that, her sword arm going limp. She stepped closer to him, head bowed, shame filling her heart. “I’m sorry,” she said quietly, not able to look him in the face.

He stood, his movements heavy and slow, as if stones were shackled to his every limb. He reached for her, cupping her elbows in his palms. “It is me who is sorry, Arya. I should have been there. For all of it. I... I could have-- I should have… to protect you.”

She paused, feeling weak and helpless under the heat of his eyes, so full of sorrow and love she nearly reeled with it where she stood. “You did protect me,” she replied sedately, stepping from his grip. She lifted the sword she held, eyes flowing up and down the steel, as familiar to her as her own hand. “When I came to Braavos, I went to a queer place. The House of Black and White. Have you heard of it?”

He shook his head, as lost as she assumed he would be. “It is a place where they worship only one god, and that is death.” She began pacing anew, feet taking up a well-worn pattern, fingers moving in a movement so unconscious it was merely a reflex by now, making the blade sing in her hands. “In order to become a servant of death, one must become no one, they must kill the person they were before.” She stopped, balancing the top of the pommel in her hand, flipping it, swirling on her feet and catching it with her other hand. “I was told to erase Arya Stark, to leave her at the bottom of the ocean. And I did, I dumped every possession I had into Ragmans Harbor. Except Needle.” She continued to pace, looking over the blade, again and again, as precious to her as rain or wind, the breath in her lungs. “I hid it away, I kept it safe... so a part of me would never die.”

She turned on her heel, stepping toward him slowly. “Without Needle, Arya Stark would have died... by enemies or otherwise. Without Needle, I would not be here. And Needle is just as much you as it is me, Jon. You protected me, always.”

Jon stood before her, limp and blinking back something powerful, something she could not begin to name. He stepped forward and crushed her to his chest, a ragged breath fleeing his mouth. She brought her arms around him, careful of Needle. Heat pressed behind her eyes and she slammed them shut, feeling her breath stutter in her lungs like the wheel of a wagon slipping in muddy ground.
“Gods, I’ve missed you,” he breathed.

She smiled, leaning her cheek against the cold leather of his hauberk. “I’ve missed you too, brother.”

They were silent for a time, reveling in the quiet, in the rare peace. She finally leaned away from him, searching his face. “Don’t leave me behind again, brother,” she said as kindly as she could muster.

“I didn’t want to,” he replied, hanging his head. “I know I was angry with you, before, but I cannot begin to thank you for what you did… for the queen. For me.”

“Aye, I suppose it is a good thing I stayed,” she said with a smirk. “Little did I know that I was protecting your future wife.”

Jon looked so weighed down, so sodden with regret Arya idly wondered how he was still on his feet. “I am sorry, sister, that you were not there.”

“As am I,” she said, unable to keep the edge from her voice. “But I know of only one way you can make it up to me.”

Jon looked at her, inquisitive, and she smiled, small and bitter. “The dead march south for us all. War is almost here, and I will not have you send me away from you so you can protect me.” She stepped away from him, spinning her blade in her hand once more, before striking it out to her right, as swift as an adder. “I will be with you through it all and there is nothing you can do to stop me.”

To her immense surprise, there was a ghost of a smile playing upon his lips when she looked back at him. He stepped toward her, silent for a time, looking her up and down, sizing her up. He grabbed up one of the wooden practice swords leaning against a rail. He spun it within his hand, acclimating himself to its weight. “Well then,” he said, taking up a fighting stance. “You may be a killer, sister, but you are not a soldier yet. Best we work on that… and I haven’t had a good spar in weeks.”

She grinned, wicked and delighted, lifting her sword.
Davos always enjoyed a nice long walk.

This night however, he did not find much comfort in his meditation. The air was dry as a bone, sticking in his lungs, the clear sky blazing with stars, as cold as he felt. Dawn was near, though it did not seem like it in the least.

He shrugged his cloak higher upon his shoulders, giving a little shiver. He came to stand beside a sentry, his chosen walk tonight consisting of pacing the walls of Winterfell like the restless wraith he was. “How are you faring, lad?”

The man turned to him, a Hornwood moose emblazoned on the jerkin covering his leather hauberk. He was no more than a boy really. He bowed slightly. “My lord--”

“Ah, don’t give me that shit, boy,” he replied crossly, “I may be Hand, but that does not make me a lord.” The boy simply nodded at him dumbly. “See anything?”

“No, my lord,” the boy looked over at him fearfully, anticipating another scolding. Davos blinked patiently at him and the boy continued. “Just… well, some men walking past, drunk and singing that damn song.”

“Song?” Davos asked. “What song?”

“The Duel of Dragons’, my lord. Same song they’ve been singing for nearly two days.”

“Ah,” Davos replied, somewhat happily. “Well, keep a weather eye out, lad.”

The boy nodded and Davos continued his way down the length of the walls, passing over the main gate with a nod to the guards posted there.

The night slackened its grip upon the world, but the chill in his bones only settled deeper. He blew
"Oi! What’s your ugly mug doing up here, eh, Seaworth?"

Davos grinned as the unmistakable figure of Tormund Giantsbane strode towards him, a longbow clutched in one hand. "And what is a one-eyed barbarian going to do with that, eh?" he called, pointing at the bow.

The man guffawed, clapping Davos so hard on his shoulder he nearly thought he’d pitch over the side of the wall. "You Southerners are funny folk. Only need one eye for aiming."

"I guess that’s why I’m here, too," another voice called through the gloom and Beric Dondarrion strode into the torchlight.

"What a fine pair you two make. Almost got a whole face between the both of you."

Tormund nodded, looking as unworried as ever. "Just like old times, Davos. Out for your walk before the battle?"

Davos shook his head, the memory chilling him better than the winter night. "Let’s hope it turns out better than that mess."

"It will," Tormund said solemnly. "With you and Snow on the walls, this one-eyed cunt with that Worm fellow at the palisades, and the Dragon Queen in the skies, I think we stand a fair better chance than we did before."

Beric chuckled. "I don’t think you can call me that anymore, Tormund, seeing as though--"

Tormund turned to the other man, his eyes flashing in threat. "Just try it, fire worshipper, and see if you keep snickering like a boy."

Beric only looked faintly amused and Davos looked between the two of them seriously. "You remember the signal, eh? And you remember what to do once you see it?"
Beric nodded sternly. “The king will not be rid of us, until death takes us.”

Davos sighed, opening his mouth to say more, when he paused at the sound of a dog barking.

It started from a distance, just one lonely voice of a single dog catching sight of a restless elk or some such. Then guard dogs and hunting hounds alike kept by the armies camped outside the walls joined in, yapping and howling madly. The racket rippled through the swathe of tents like the scattering of crows, until it reached into the kennels of Winterfell.

Davos stepped toward the a battlement, leaning his hands against the icy stone. He squinted his eyes, as if he could pierce through the dark.

One by one, the mad barking was snuffed out like so many candles. The silenced mayhem met by new, fresh sounds of men shouting, of people innumerable jostling for weapons.

He lunged from where he stood, sprinting down the gangway. The wind was picking up, his eyes stinging from the cold. He could hear Tormund and Beric flee down the other side, shouting the same as he: “ALARM! ALARM! SOUND THE ALARM! THE DEAD HAVE COME! THE DEAD HAVE COME!”

One by one, the bells rang out their dread warning, great watchfires winking into life behind him like stars upon the setting of the sun.

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Chapter End Notes

*peers around the corner sheepishly*

I am the absolute worst, I know. But I'm finally in a spot where I feel like the updates won't take so long. I just had to take some time to do it. Had a lot of nasty personal
issues to deal with in the interim as well, that definitely made it harder for me to write.

Some chess pieces being shifted about in this chapters. Some much-needed meetings and conversations being had. Everything in Volantis was as canon as I could make it, but some things were definitely lifted from my own crazy brain. I don't want to hear any whining.

I hope the summary at the beginning helped out. I know it's been so long. Like I said, I'm the worst.

To those of you still out there reading and supporting my dumb ass: Thank you so much. I don't deserve your dedication. To any newcomers: welcome to Frost's Wild Ride.

Thank you so very much to hardlyfatal for being such a dear and willing combing through 34 pages of my drivel for fun.

Thank you so much to the Discerning Tarts for cheering me on though my slog. Y'all owe this update to them, honestly. Special shout out to justwanderingneverlost for that moodboard. LOOK AT THAT THING OF BEAUTY.

And, finally, thanks to all you fine, patient, lovely readers. You crazy souls are why I have dedicated a good chunk of my life to a novel-length season eight speculation fic that makes me want to tear out my own hair at times. So... thanks? (No really thank you so much). I hope this chapter was worth the wait. Chapter 15 should be out soon (as in 2-3 weeks. But I promise it's not gonna be another four months).

Come say hi on tumblr!
Night

Chapter Summary

“Stay on Drogon, no matter what you do. No matter what you may see. You stay on that bloody dragon until the world crumbles under you.”

Her fists clenched in his tunic, his armor still in an ignored pile in the corner. “I will,” she whispered brokenly into his ear. “But if I must watch the world crumble beneath me, I will make sure Drogon has plucked you from the fires first.”

Chapter Notes

RECAP:

TEAM WINTERFELL:
Jon and Dany have mustered their forces in Winterfell. Dany has told Jon that she is pregnant and everyone save for the lord and ladies and the common folk know about Jon's heritage. Jon and Dany led a mission to hunt down the Night King in order to bring him and his dragon down. They were successful with the dragon, but the Night King escaped (though, not unscathed). Dany was injured, and had a wound on her thigh that could not be cauterized with conventional metals since she is the Unburnt. Jon, in desperation, thrust Longclaw into the fire and healed her with it. It left a very queer mark behind and forever altered Longclaw. Jaime and Bronn have arrived with the Lannister armies. He was initially thrown into a cell for lying about what Cersei was planning, but eventually pleaded his case with the help of Brienne and is now leading his and the Northern armies.

The dead have finally arrived and everyone is preparing for battle.

TEAM KINGSLANDING/EURON:
Cersei has given orders to Euron to take the Golden Company back to Essos, with the sole purpose of sacking the former slaver cities and drawing Daenerys away from Westeros. Euron is not very happy about this. He had bargained on marrying Cersei, being named King of the Seven Kingdoms, and crushing Jon and Dany's forces with the Golden Company he had just ferried back from Essos, but he reluctantly agrees. On the way back to Essos, Euron stops at Dragonstone and sacks it. Theon, pursuing his uncle to rescue Yara, sees all this and ends up captured by Euron and his men. To buy some time for himself, his sister, and for Daenerys and her people (Euron plans to hold the people left on Dragonstone as hostage in one last-ditch effort to draw Daenerys away before he has to sail to Slaver's Bay), Theon claims to have been sent by Dany to make him an offer of marriage, a proposal that seems much more pleasing to Euron than a siege a world away. Euron is intrigued, and sends a raven to Dany and co at Winterfell with his 'terms'. Dany must come within the fortnight to wed him and 'consummate' or he will kill every last person left on Dragonstone. Meanwhile, Theon tries to make a plan with his sister.

ACROSS THE NARROW SEA:
Melisandre has paid a visit to Kinvara at the Temple of the Lord of Light in Volantis. She speaks to Kinvara about the slavery in Volantis and of Daenerys and Jon. They come to an agreement that may or may not be a revolt to free the slaves and bring them to the aid of Jon and Dany.

I think that's it. ENJOY!
It had been raining four days.

A ceaseless, icy drizzle soaked the treeless cliffs of Dragonstone to its bones. Sodden and sullen, Theon tramped up the steep causeway to the castle’s gates.

He tried wringing himself off as best he could once within the shelter of the fortress and made his way, damp and shivering, to the western tower. “Where the beast Stannis hid away his blighted daughter before he killed her,” the toothless old porter who seemed as ancient as the castle’s walls had told him upon his first failed visit. “Sometimes I can still hear her singin’.”

This was his fourth attempt in as many days, but this time, he would succeed in getting into the guarded chamber. “Got you that girl you like,” Theon told the doleful turnkey at the door. “She’s waiting for you in the barracks. Now piss off.”

The man brightened, smirking at him before digging into his belt and dropping the key into Theon’s palm and trotting away.
Euron’s men certainly came cheap.

Theon stood before the door, the surface black and strangely lustered. Everything was strange here. A patina of life and death lay heavy over almost every surface, witnessed by the dark, glittering eyes of the many serpents sculpted into the rock.

He heaved a great breath, closed his eyes, turned the key with a soft ‘click’ and opened the door.

The room beyond was dim and drafty, lit by only one candle. The thunder of the sea could be felt just as well as it could be heard— the thrash of the tide echoing through the soles of his boots. His eyes searched, adjusting to the dark.

Slowly, a figure stepped out of the gloom and into the paltry glow of the taper. “Theon?” his sister gasped.

Already, his voice failed him. He choked on his own breath, his chest constricting almost intolerably.

“You look exactly the same, brother, since when I last saw you,” she went on with a nod, her disappointed, knowing expression so familiar he wanted to cry out. “Like a drowned dog.”

He grappled with his tongue, his lungs, trying with all his might to pry whatever it was he wanted to say from the clutches of his locked up nerves, the weight of his shame.

“So, what are you here for, brother?” Yara asked coolly, throwing her hands up. She wore a rough-spun frock and soft leather shoes. “Has our uncle grown bored of forcing food down my throat and nearly drowning me in wash basins? He wishes to send my ghost of a brother to me as what? Some sort of reward? Some company? I’d sooner throw myself into the sea.”

Her face was gaunt, her eyes rimmed with darkness, hair shorn clumsily. Theon had heard that she had fought them— that his uncle’s men had to hold her down when they came for her to ‘clean her up’. “Wouldn’t want to upset my future wife with the sight of her former admiral in such a state. Need to get you cleaned up a bit, dear niece.”

Theon remembered that day too well. Just hours after Euron had penned the raven to Daenerys, he had ordered Yara brought to him, and for Theon to stay, so he could see what had become of his
“traitor sister”. The image of Yara—strong, capable, proud Yara—black-eyed and bloody, hair matted and muddied, clothes torn to shreds, would haunt him the rest of his miserable days.

She had fought them as they took her away. Had refused to eat the fine food they brought her. Had refused the fine clothes. If her queen was to come to Dragonstone to make peace with her tormentor, Yara wanted to ensure that Daenerys Targaryen would see every last scrap of proof of the damage Euron had wrought with her own eyes.

For one wild moment, Theon’s instinct to flee was almost too much for him to fight. He almost, almost stepped back to the door, to leave and never come back. Convince himself that he had never had a sister, that he had never abandoned her to a fate worse than death. He had convinced himself he was no longer Theon Greyjoy, after all. That he was no more than a plaything, no better than a hunting hound and perhaps lesser than even that. How hard could it be?

But he stopped himself, swallowed hard. “I’m sorry,” was all he could manage, his voice a pathetic thing.

His sister snorted. “You’re sorry?” she asked, the venom in her words stinging him as good as a thistle. “And why, exactly, would I care that you’re sorry, brother?”

He began shaking his head, eyes wide and unblinking, staring resolutely at a crack in the floor. A seawind found its way in through the high window and the candle wavered. “I— I didn’t know what else to do.”

He regretted the words almost as soon as they left his lips. He slammed his eyes shut as she stepped closer. “What else to do?” she repeated quietly, a breath of incredulity leaving her. “You did not know what else to do but to abandon your sister? To jump into the fucking sea so that I could be leashed like a dog and paraded through King’s Landing? Have shit and stones thrown at me by people who had no idea who I even was? To be beaten and raped night after—”

“I KNOW!” he shouted, able to withstand it no longer. “I know, Yara, I know!” His chest was heaving. She was stunned into silence, but her face betrayed only anger. Hatred. “I know that I’m a bloody coward. That I abandoned my own blood when I knew damn well what they would do to you. That you are better than me, Yara. You always have been.” He looked to the floor again, shaking his head. “But what was I supposed to do? Me? One coward against fucking Euron Greyjoy and his entire crew?”

“Not flee,” she gritted out, “not leave me like I was nothing more than some whore you had grown bored with.”
“And what if I had stayed?” he cried. “What then? What could have been done then?” He licked his lips, stepped more fully toward her. Her eyes flickered, as if she were looking upon a stranger. “He would have killed or captured me and then I would have had no hope of doing fuck all for you, sister.” He shook his head. “I couldn’t save you then, because I have always been a shit fighter, you know that… but I can save you now.”

Yara sobered, something in her eyes softening as she looked him over a moment, searching for something within him he knew wasn’t there. She had been looking at him like that for too long.

Finally, she looked away, pacing back to the wall. “I don’t want rescuing, brother,” she said quietly, something deadly hidden in her tone. “I only want to taste our uncle’s blood. To see every last one of his precious ships burn. Every last cock of every last man who has forced themselves on me chopped off and thrown into the sea as an offering to the Drowned God. Only then can I be at peace.”

This was exactly what Theon had been hoping to hear. He stepped closer, hands behind his back. “I could not rescue you, or crown you as a true queen of the Iron Islands, but this is one thing I think I could give to you, Yara, if you’ll let me.”

Yara’s eyes flared in the yellow light of the candle. She looked skeptical, yet more alive, more like the firebrand captain of the Iron Fleet that had lead them through storms and sieges, than he had seen in what felt like an age. “How, dear brother?”

+++ He could smell blood.

There were other scents in the air— sweet rot and juniper, moss and sedge, the strange, cold scent of snow.

But it was the blood that pierced through, swirled in his brain so sharp and blazing it nearly drove him mad, calling him on like a siren.

He loped among silver limned trees, crunched through frost and mud, but he did not feel the cold.
The world was oddly quiet and oddly noisome all at once. A great rustling surrounded him, as if an immense beast of ancient forests was tailing him— or perhaps many beasts all at once.

He ran for miles and miles, never tiring, never straying from some distant target that he could not yet see. The wood slowly came alive around him with every league— the spray of snow from a swaying branch, the bray of a winded beast, the clamor of carrion birds.

Finally, the trees thinned, the loam opened up. A swathe of bare, rolling hills velveted by snow stretched below him. And, cresting one lonely peak, was a ring of stones sprouting from the frost like teeth. An unassuming crown for an unassuming realm. A place hallowed and haunted and long forgotten by man.

The dark line of forest surrounding the hill teemed with sound and movement. Fierce-eyed owls hooted and screeched, tallow-colored deer snorted and stamped their sharp hooves, badger and bear and marmot alike stood shoulder to shoulder, shifting and sighing, looking upon the borders of this strange country.

Countless eyes of countless hues flashed in the quicksilver of the winter moon. A circle of watchfires, fed by a depthless hunger, all bound in an unnameable and unknowable truce forged with the making of the world.

He threw his head back, and howled.

+++ 

He wished he had thought to bring his bloody wine.

Sitting on a damp dirt floor in a cold, dark chamber was not exactly what he would call an ideal way to pass the time during a siege.

And it was bloody crowded to boot. Every last resident of Winterfell unable to fight or unwilling to flee to White Harbor with the advance guard of the Manderlys had been crammed into the crypts along with a cadre of Unsullied and a company of skittish, screaming horses.

“This is maddening,” Sansa muttered at his side, pulling her handsome cloak further up her shoulders. “I can’t stand being down here while…” she trailed off, looking to the damp roof, face
pained and sad.

“The consequences of being named heir, I’m afraid,” Tyrion replied sourly. “Can’t have us dying as well.”

Sansa shot him a dark look and he sobered, realizing that his usual gallows humor would not be appreciated by a woman whose remaining family walked the walls of a castle under attack by a force that was as wicked and formidable as one could ever imagine.

“Where is Bran?” Sansa asked, craning her head to search the faces of the crowd. “He is supposed to be here with us.”

“I don’t know, but wherever he is, he’s probably with Sam,” Gilly replied snappishly, her eyes worried and fearful as she bounced a grumpy little Sam upon her hip. She shook her head, despairing. “I hope someone finds them soon.”

“Commander Grey Worm has sent out scouts to find stragglers,” Sansa comforted, her previously worried eyes turning soft with warmth. “They’ll be found soon enough.”

Gilly said nothing, looking toward the direction of the entrance as she worried at her bottom lip with her teeth.

“Lord Varys,” Tyrion said, leaning closer to his friend who sat silent and eerily calm next to him. “Please tell me you managed to slip a flagon under those billowing sleeves.”

The man shook his head. “Why would I think to bring wine, my lord?”

Tyrion scrunched his nose in mock hurt. “Well, because you are my friend.”

Varys lifted his shoulders and Tyrion sighed. He looked pointedly to Missandei, sat across from him, anxiety carefully hidden behind her dark eyes. She shook her head at him in quiet dissent before he could even open his mouth to ask.

He shook his head, thoroughly disappointed with his counterparts until he spotted Podrick,
standing silently next to Brienne. Tyrion brightened, shifting forward. “Podrick! Surely your service under Brienne of Tarth has not made you a teetotaler?”

Podrick stammered for a moment, before he lowered his head apologetically under his lady’s questioning stare. “I do not drink, my lord… anymore.”

Tyrion let out a long, frustrated breath through his nose. “That is disappointing, Pod. And to think, you had been so full of promise.”

Podrick gave him a fond, bashful smile and Tyrion tilted his head, squinting his eyes at his former squire’s new mistress.

“Lady Brienne,” Tyrion called to the tall, solemn woman standing beside them, now truly desperate. The woman was as still and stolid as the many statues at their backs. He idly wondered if she had ever had a sip of wine in her life. “You wouldn't have happened to have snatched any wine on your way here?”

Brienne slid her eyes to him, looking at him as if he were joking. And, by the gods, he wished he were. If he was to be stranded in what amounted to a dusty cellar while the world ended around him, he might as well get drunk.

“You should be with my brother,” Sansa interjected in the wake of Brienne’s stubborn silence. The Lady of Winterfell looked up at the woman with no small amount of disdain. “You’re useless down here. My brother needs you more than we ever would.”

“It is by your brother’s command that I am here, my lady,” Brienne responded coolly.

“I seem to remember releasing you of your oath to me, Lady Brienne,” Sansa retorted with a grim line to her mouth.

Brienne turned more fully toward Sansa, looking surprisingly—and very thoroughly—put out. “So that I may serve the king, my lady, and the king wishes to see you and the Lord Tyrion safe. He has honored me with this task.”

Sansa looked angry enough to spit fire, but obviously knew better than to argue with the stubborn Brienne of Tarth.
It was silent for a long, uncomfortable while. Tyrion frowned, fiddling with the lacings of his tunic. Desperate for distraction, he turned his attentions from acquiring wine to annoying Brienne. “It must drive you mad, Lady Brienne,” Tyrion began airly, “stuck down here with the old and the sick and screaming babes, while your compatriots fight for Winterfell. For their king.”

Brienne’s shoulders twitched, but her face remained as impassive as a stone. She brought herself up straighter, the top of her head nearly brushing the low roof of the crypt. “There are many ways to serve, my lord,” she replied tightly. “And protecting the king and queen’s heirs is an honor few ever know.”

“Oh yes, to be sure,” Tyrion responded with an earnest nod. “And even fewer sing of those few who die in a dusty and dark cellar protecting a dwarf and a widow of a bastard.”

Sansa shot him such an acid look, Tyrion thought she may very well burn a hole straight through his doublet. Brienne, on the other hand inhaled deeply, as if steadying herself, before turning about on her heels. “Does anyone have any wine for the Hand of the Queen?” she shouted over the murmuring masses. A hush spread over the crowd, but no one came forward. “You will be well paid.”

At that, an old woman stepped through the throng, a flask gripped in her gnarled fingers. She shoved it toward Tyrion, holding her other hand out expectantly. He looked to Brienne, alarmed, who only shrugged at him with the hint of a smug smile on her lips.

Sighing, Tyrion pulled his money bag from his hastily packed rucksack and pressed two silvers into the woman’s hand. She shuffled off, grumbling in complaint. He unstoppered the flask and drank deeply and coughed—the taste was most foul compared to the fine spirits he was used to, but it would most certainly get the job done.

Sansa leaned closer to him. “It seems the Lady Brienne is as stubborn as I am, my lord,” she whispered with a small, knowing smile. “Thank you for trying, at any rate.”

He shrugged, managing to grin sheepishly as he passed over the flask. Sansa took it with some hesitation before having a quaff. Her face screwed up in disgust as she sputtered and gasped, beating a fist on her chest.

Tyrion smiled ruefully at her, lifting his hand in a defeated gesture. “To surviving, my lady.”
“Aye,” she said with another look to Brienne as she raised the flask before her. “To surviving.”

+++

Jon cinched up her gambit, tightened the leathers on her pauldron, tugged at the chainmail over her stomach, his fingers lingering and clumsy.

“I did not know you were such a good squire, my lord.”

He looked at her, incredulous, maybe a bit scolding. “How can you make jokes right now?”

She grimaced, before she attempted to recover by giving him a weak smile. “I thought it might be good for morale, my love.”

Jon sighed heavily, bringing her sword belt around her waist. “I wish you would have had more time to train with this,” he said instead, changing the subject.

She placed a stilling hand upon his worrying fingers, where they had been fretting with the buckle for no real rhyme or reason. “Please, Jon,” she whispered. “Please.”

He looked at her, tracing the planes of her face, as if memorizing them like lines on a map. And she returned his study, taking in the precious curves and angles of his jaw, his mouth, his nose and cheeks — everything.

His chest hitched, a black weight growing as good as a weed between them. He choked, not able to hold her gaze any longer. He pulled her to him fiercely, clutching the short locks of her hair within frantic fingers.

“Stay on Drogon, no matter what you do. No matter what you may see. You stay on that bloody dragon until the world crumbles under you.”

Her fists clenched in his tunic, his armor still in an ignored pile in the corner. “I will,” she
whispered brokenly into his ear. “But if I must watch the world crumble beneath me, I will make sure Drogon has plucked you from the fires first.”

He managed to laugh and something strange and dark unspooled in her belly. He buried his face into her hair, rocking her a bit. She never wanted to leave, just then, perfectly pleased to stay there forever, to burn up together with the unmaking of the world.

She turned her head, kissing the junction of his shoulder and neck, leaning away from him. “Now, Jon Snow,” she whispered, “let’s get you dressed.”

+++ 

It was all going far too well.

After an impassioned entreaty to her armies, Daenerys had risen into the sky with her dragons, and their hellfire had poured into the ready trenches like floodwaters. The flames soared to at least fifteen feet high as she commanded her sons into the clouds. Their mission was simple and treacherous all at once: scout for the Night King and his lieutenants armed with their deadly ice spears. She would then burn a trail through the dead for their armies to flow through, to lead them straight to their most vital target.

As long as the trenches and palisades held fast, there was no real need for her and her dragons to expose themselves just yet. Likewise, her Dothraki—with their horses screaming and chomping in the rising winds—sat mounted and ready behind the lines of burning pitch and dung, pitch-slicked palisades, and rank after rank of her stolid Unsullied that stood unmoving and lethal in neat lines.

Jon’s part in all this was far simpler, and decidedly less precarious. He held the walls of Winterfell with Arya, Davos, Tormund and the Hound, looking on as the few dead who found their way through the lines smashed their frail bodies upon the slippery stones of the walls, or else screeched in agony as a flaming arrow found its mark.

It made him sick with shame, thinking about being up upon the battlements, protected on nearly all sides, with relatively little danger presenting itself, while his pregnant wife sailed the skies—her only protection the thorny hides of her fearsome sons.

Thankfully, no hellhound beast would be tailing her, but this was small comfort in the light of his mounting dread.
“The trenches seem to be doing their job well enough,” Davos pointed out. The archers were in free volley now, the numbers of dead reaching the walls so small it seemed to hardly matter.

“Aye,” Jon grunted back, eyes roving anxiously—the sweep of the moors beneath him, the lines of the walls, the gray rumple of the sky.

“It’s queer,” Tormund said with a creased brow. “Storm should be bigger than this little snow flurry here.”

Jon inwardly agreed with his friend. The snow was but a smattering, the clouds overhead thin and gauzy. It certainly was not warm, but the chill was no worse than Jon had ever felt within his days at the Wall. Whenever the dead came for their pound of flesh, the chill was as close to devastating that Jon ever hoped to get.

He said nothing, though. It would not do well for one of his men—already scared shitless at seeing the reanimated dead with their own two eyes at last—to overhear their king and commander casting doubt, speculating even darker tidings than the ones already at their gates.

“Advance vanguard, perhaps?” Davos asked.

“We aren’t dealing with fancypants lords, Seaworth, with all their strategy and other bollocks,” Tormund retorted.

Davos’s brow grew considerably more lined as he leaned closer to Jon. “What do you think, Your Grace?” he asked, candid as possible over the whipping wind and the sound of men shouting and fires roaring. “You’ve had more run-ins with this lot than any of us here.”

Jon hung his head, his hand tightening on the pommel of Longclaw. As much as he hated war, as much as he was exhausted of fighting and battles and death—now that war was here he wished nothing more than to ride out and meet it head on. To unseat the beautiful blade at his hip and use it to paint the earth red, to hear the glorious chorus of death laid to rest forevermore in his ears.

“Tell the men to stop with the pitch,” he finally answered.
Davos’ eyes widened. “But, Your Grace—”

“We won’t have enough for a whole day at the rate we’re going,” he snapped back, his patience long since run dry. He stepped closer to his Hand, dropping his voice lower. “I don’t like it, Davos, but I think there is a game at play here.” He looked back to Tormund. “Keep the archers in volley, but reserve your arrows. Don’t waste shots.”

Tormund and Davos both nodded. Tormund trotted off, bellowing commands, while Davos rang a bell hanging from a post beside him. Several voices rang out in answer, calling to the pitchmen to halt.

With that, Jon turned on his heel, striding to the stairs that would lead him down into the main courtyard with The Hound and Arya close at his heels.

“Your Grace!” Davos called after him, sounding a bit frantic. “Where are you going?”

In truth, he wasn’t so certain. He just knew he needed to do… something. “I’m going to ride out and meet Jaime Lannister,” he finally landed upon. Jaime was rallying his armies, bringing up the rear. Though their numbers were much needed, they were also the most vulnerable—perhaps only a third of the Lannister men had been armed with dragonglass weapons. Jon did not rightly know what he would do to change this dire circumstance, but he was certain it would be better than staying here.

Davos opened his mouth to no doubt protest, to tell him what Jon already knew—that seeing the king leave the walls may prove harmful for morale, but the admonishment was left in his throat by the arrival of Samwell Tarly.

“Your Grace,” Sam greeted somewhat breathlessly, bowing.

“Sam!” Jon exclaimed, “you’re supposed to be in the crypts, damn you. And how many times have I told you—“

“Please, Jon,” Sam interrupted, words rushed and harried. “It’s your brother. He needs to see you right away.”

Jon looked Sam up and down, completely mystified as to why his brother was not only not in the
crypts as he had assumed and ordered, but also as to what reason Bran would have for requesting an audience at a time like this. But Sam was puffing laboriously, as if he had ran here from the Godswood, his dark eyes wide with entreaty.

“Look here, son,” Davos began, waving a hand at Sam in agitation, “the king is in no position to —”

“No,” Jon cut across him. Something odd and needling was creeping up his spine. “My brother wishes an audience, Davos, and he shall have it. He would not request one without proper cause.” Jon looked to Sam pointedly at this and his friend nodded mutely in assurance. “Lead the way, Sam. Davos, you have the walls until I return.”

Davos was positively bristling, but he managed to keep his protests to himself and nodded.

Jon made for the stairs again, but Sam balked, pointing at The Hound and Arya behind him. “Um, forgive me, but Bran wishes to speak to you alone.”

“He’s my brother too you know,” Arya quipped coldly.

The Hound adjusted the grip on his hilt. “I don’t aim on staying here when I’m the king’s bloody sworn shield, Tarly.”

Jon knew there would be no fighting it— the two people at his shoulders were perhaps the most stubborn people he knew… besides his wife. “They can wait at a permissible distance, my friend.”

Sam looked reluctant, but seemed to decide that there was no use in protesting further and turned to descend the rickety staircase.

“Tell me, Sam,” Jon began when they reached the courtyard— eerily quiet and empty in the wake of all able bodies being sent to the lines or else the top of the walls, with the rest of them huddled in the crypts. “What reason is there for you and my brother to disobey the orders of me and the queen?”

Sam glanced shiftily at him as they walked. “You best send someone to get those folks out of the crypts, Your Grace,” he answered instead.
Jon halted. “Why?”

Sam looked deeply uncomfortable. “Bran will explain it better than I ever could.”

“What the bloody hells is going on, Sam?” For hours now, Jon’s foreboding had grown like a weed within him, and now it was sprouting thorns that dug into his heart with a cruel edge.

“Just— just get them out of there, Jon. And best be quick about it. Best… best that you abandon the castle before it’s too late.”

“You’re bloody mad!” Arya spat from his side. “We can’t leave Winterfell! This is our home!”

“Aye,” Jon added darkly, “we cannot give up the one defensible position we have. Not now.”

Sam looked utterly despaired. “You have to know it too, Jon! You’ve had to have felt that something was very wrong.”

Jon stilled at this, blinking at his friend in some wonder. Sam stood before him with such passionate desperation in his face, Jon felt himself go cold, his limbs growing heavy as timbers. He turned his face to Arya with a grim nod. “Go. Gather the others. Get them out of here.”

Her eyes flashed. “What did I say, Jon?” she began hotly. “I won’t leave you! I’m staying right here!”

He cursed, inwardly wondering why every last person around him saw fit to defy him. He was a bloody king. Were people not supposed to obey kings? “Your sister is down there,” he nearly shouted, “and they’re all in danger, Arya. Sam has the right of it— something it very wrong. I feel it in my bloody bones. You have to go get them and leave.”

She looked ready to sob, to pound her fists to ribbons upon the walls, to draw her blade and run him through. “Leave Winterfell?” she asked brokenly, astonished. “Leave our home? Jon—”
Jon yanked her in his arms, crushing her small form to his chest. “I know, Arya. Gods, I know.” He pulled back to look at her. “But I can’t trust anyone else with this… and if I don’t get them out of here now… I’ll never forgive myself if something happens. Get them out.”

She looked murderous, but her shoulders fell in defeat. “But what about Daenerys?” she asked. “Isn’t she supposed to back the evacuation with her dragons? And more importantly, aren’t you supposed to ride with her?”

Jon felt his throat close up at that. She was bloody right, after all. He turned back to Sam. “If all my brother had to tell me was that Winterfell was lost, then go gather him from the Godswood and let’s be done with it.” He looked up to the sky, idly wondering where Daenerys was at that moment, if she sensed it too. “I have promises to keep.”

“That was a bloody mistake there, Snow,” The Hound growled ominously. “Promises don’t abide in war.”

Sam stepped forward, licking his lips nervously. “I can’t explain, Jon, but you must start the evacuation, and with all haste. And you must come with me.”

Jon’s shoulders sagged and he turned to his sister once more, helpless. Arya looked between him and Sam doubtfully, and for a moment Jon was unsure if she was going to relent, but she eventually stepped away, looking to The Hound. “You better see that my brother gets out of here in one piece, dog, or I’ll have another face for my collection.”

The Hound merely grunted and Arya trotted off in the direction of the crypts after one last, long look at Jon. Her eyes spoke clear as day: don’t do anything stupid.

Grief invading every inch of him, a bleak and cold determination steeling his nerves, he plucked a torch from the wall and walked to the center of the courtyard where an enormous pile of tree limbs and broken chairs and tables sat within a ring of tumbledown stones. The signal fire. The one last, dread warning.

He tossed the torch into the middle and all came alight within the span of a few breaths. But he did not stay to watch the flames leap into the night. He strode away as bells and shouts of panic and horror echoed throughout the castle.

Winterfell is lost.
“Not as excitin’ as I thought it was going to be, tell you the truth.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Jaime asked his companion as he yanked on his gloves and shifted in his saddle, as twitchy as an unbroken colt.

Bronn shrugged. “I suppose,” he said with a sigh, glancing up into the clouds. “Just glad those bloody demons are on our side now.”

“You’re right about that, my friend,” Jaime replied. “But I don’t think you will favor our new adversary any more than a dragon.”

Bronn scoffed, crossing his wrists over the horn of his saddle. “I don’t know about that, Kingslayer, but I suppose there’s only one way to find out.”

“Do you want them to break our lines?” Jaime inquired in exasperation.

Again, Bronn shrugged. “I’d like to try out this fancy new sword King Snow gave me,” he said, patting his belt where a black-steel sword was sheathed in a shiny new scabbard. “Besides, it’d be a damn sight better than being the rear guard to a rout.”

Jaime sagged at this, his heart growing heavy. He had no doubt why the queen had appointed him and his armies with the task—if their forces should be overrun, they would take up the rear of the retreat to fight off the enemy’s advance. It was a death sentence and an honor all at once. An honor to be trusted with the essential task of protecting the tail of her and the king’s forces, and a death sentence, as his own armies would likely be picked off, ill prepared as they were.

“The queen said she’d cover us. I have no reason to doubt her,” Jaime assured, if not a bit weakly.

Bronn kissed his teeth. “We’ll see.”
Jaime was just going to ask him why, exactly, he was still here if he was so bloody sure they were going to die, when he thought better of it. He looked back to line, at least a league ahead, where brilliant flame blotted out the sky and smoke grew and curled like ferns. All that could be heard from his position was the general jostle of men and horses—many bodies awaiting a fight, a glorious victory or glorious defeat.

Most of them looked scared shitless, pale faces turned to the walls of flame, the smell of soot and pitch a noxious fume, the strange quiet only heightening their fear.

Then the racket of the horses started to grow.

He did not notice it at first, having travelled into his own thoughts, gathering the trappings of his bravery to gird his nerves. His horse reared with a scream and he pulled back on the reins, shushing and soothing best he could. Bronn’s own mount was losing its composure, tossing his head, eyes wide and rolling, teeth working the bit noisily.

All around him horses were rearing, kicking, men shouting as they tried their best to calm their mounts. The air came alive with the sound of whickers and snorts and roars. It chilled him to his core.

With some effort he wheeled his panicked steed around to see the lines of his calvary breaking, the frightened breaths of the usually stalwart horses pluming and coalescing into a fog of fear. Bewildered men slid from their saddles to have a closer look, grabbing the poor beasts by the bit and yanking to force them into submission.

“Jaime,” came Bronn’s voice from over his shoulder. It was uncharacteristically unsteady. Jaime turned his head and he felt his heart nearly leap out of his mouth.

A storm cloud. The most fearsome he had ever seen—huge and hulking, reaching into the borders of the heavens, frothing and boiling like some wicked witch’s brew. It was the color of the palest ash, veined with voids of black. A fierce, glacial blue pulsed continually within, bruising the vault of cloud in a macabre display of nature’s wrath.

And before the storm, came an enormous host of something, a black cloud against the raging sky seemingly to be merely a scrap of smoke, growing darker and more dreadful as it raced towards them.
The terrible noise of the cloud’s chorus of death was the last thing Jaime heard before the wind blotted out all other sound.

+++ "Things seemed so peaceful, way up here.

Dany made tight figure eights above the sheet of cloud, telling Drogon to dip below at every arc for only a few seconds so she may try to spot her quarry. She and her son became something of a lethal needle and thread weaving through the sky.

Rhaegal kept watch in a different way, circling just above her, before diving to circle just below, his golden eyes wary and searching. She had caught Jon stroking the dragon’s snout just before he had seen her off. She now had a strong suspicion as to what he may have asked of her son.

She felt almost shameful, up here above the brewing chaos, in an easy flight with her sons. Nearly unreachable, untouchable. Armored with plate and mail, sword and sheath, fire and hide.

She tried to keep her apprehensions at bay.

During battle, Dany found that she could keep a clear head easy enough, her eyes hard as flint, her focus sinking to nothing but a pin light, but not now. Not while things remained so quiet below.

The dead shambled across the knotty moors, silent and queer. They seemed to possess no formation, no strategy, only driven ever onward by a force that perhaps no mortal man could ever hope to understand.

Their numbers were indeed great, Daenerys had never seen a mass of life so vast and terrifying, but their press was paltry. They fell into the fiery trenches like they were naught but kindling, dashed their frail bodies upon the stones and palisades of Winterfell almost impotently. For every one that the dead took, the living took three times over.

She warred within herself, wondering if Jon was as troubled as she, contemplating if she should go find him atop the walls, tell him what she was seeing from her considerable vantage. He had ordered her to the skies, never to come down until they either claimed victory, or rendezvoused at White Harbor, but she had never been one for following orders.
She heard Rhaegal give a warning call just as she felt the wind pick up and bite into her cloud-damp cheeks. Drogon pitched beneath her, turning to face the north.

‘Halt, my son,’ she told Drogon and he hovered, great wings stirring up the soup of the clouds around them as they looked on and Dany felt herself go numb, her lungs go hollow.

In the distance a great and vicious thunderhead roiling with infernal light was heading toward them like a galleon slicing through the swells on a good wind.

But the sound. She had never heard anything like it and she was sure it would haunt her the rest of her days—a tremendous din of deathly caws and squawks and screams undercut with the grisly dry scrape of bone on bone, the angry clack of beaks—growing louder and louder, a cresting wave of noise that would chill the blood of the bravest man.

Rhaegal sent out a glut of flame, bringing the sky alight before them.

Hundreds, thousands of birds—crows, ravens, starlings, eagles, owls… innumerable revenants bearing down upon her and her children, their gruesome death rattles deafening in her ears.

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The Godswood, as usual, was unearthly quiet. The shouts and bustle of the evacuating castle seemed to scarcely touch the sanctity of this sacred grove.

Jon marched along behind Sam, the Hound some feet behind, surly and silent as ever.

They came upon the weirwood. It seemed a ghastly and skeletal thing, much of its leaves now missing, crimson petals spread like little rafts on the glassy plane of the pool so it appeared not but a lake of blood.

“Brother,” Bran greeted coolly, “I thought that you may not come.”
“Aye, well, by all accounts I should not be here.”

Bran inclined his head. He looked more lively and animated than Jon had seen him in an age, before his fall.

“There are many things to be told, brother.”

“Then speak,” Jon said solemnly, eyes darting about in impatience. Nerves. The wind was picking up. “I suspect we do not have much time.”

“Time is the most precious of gifts,” Bran said, somewhat acerbically. “I am afraid that I am not afforded enough to tell you as truly as I would hope, but that is a complaint none can tend to.”

Jon said nothing, as patient as he possibly could be with a storm now kicking up in the distance. But still, Bran offered nothing. “Why did you order the castle evacuated?” he asked, done with waiting.

Bran smiled coldly at that. His face was lined, older than he was— eyes bruised with insomnia. Skin palid with ill eating. “The Night King is more clever than you give him credit for, brother.”

Jon snorted. “I think I know just how clever the bastard—”

“You don’t,” Bran cut across him simply.

Jon stood, trying not to feel faintly insulted. “What is it that you need of me, brother?” he asked tightly.

“You have ordered the evacuation of the castle?”

“Aye,” Sam answered for him.

Bran nodded, grim and lifeless. “You must know, Jon, that when the Night King fell from his dragon that day— he did not emerge unscathed.”
“Aye, I had assumed as much, brother.”

Bran inclined his head. “His weakened state has allowed me unprecedented access.” Bran looked over at him with a queer smile. “Access to his memories. Memories that have long faded from the pages of history.”

Jon started at that, walking closer and kneeling before his brother, his heart pounding. “What have you seen?”

“You take your Targaryen blood for granted, brother,” Bran replied, the queer smile growing into something more real, more human. “You do not fully appreciate the power that lies within the mingling of the blood of Valyria and the First Men.”

Jon let go of the breath he had been unthinkingly holding, not knowing what to possibly say to this. He well-remembered Bran’s dread warnings and words of prophecy and magic when he had altered his reality forever. When he had revealed to him the truth that he had so long sought.

Every great gift exacts a great price.

“Close your eyes, brother, and see what power lies within you.”

“I don’t know how to do that,” Jon said, shaking his head, his ire rising again. “I don’t know what you are talking—”

“The blood of the First Men flows in me,” Bran interrupted cooly, looking to the ghastly, gaping face of the weirwood. “The First Men eventually found favor with the Old Gods. They bestowed the gifts they gave to the Children of the Forest to our ancestors as well, after a pact was reached many, many years ago.”

“Wargs,” he answered with a nod, “greenseers, like you.”

Bran nodded. “Yes.”
Jon shook his head. “I am not a warg or a greenseer, brother.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Then what are these… powers I am supposed to have?” Jon asked, unable to keep his irritation from his voice any longer. He stood from his crouch, waving an impatient hand. The wind was really howling now, the trees whipping and swaying in the tumult. “I have to go, Bran. And so do you.”

“The Children of the Forest and the First Men were not able to defeat the plague that they had unleashed upon themselves, only stem the tide by raising a wall. A wall that would eventually fall. The hero of the Red God, Azor Ahai, he could not banish the darkness, only keep it at bay for a time.” Bran inclined his head to him. “The Red God once favored the people of Valyria, had once blessed them with the power of his sacred fire.”

Jon looked to Sam, completely bewildered. Sam just lifted a shoulder ever so slightly. The brother that he knew, the Bran who used to climb the walls and steal meat pies from the kitchens, was never much interested in gods. And neither was Jon. They could all fuck off, in his opinion. He wanted no part of it.

“Enough, Bran, we have to leave.” Snow was starting whip about. The peace and silence of the godswood beginning to fracture with the sounds of people shouting and horses screaming and braying in the distance.

“Where men went wrong, Jon,” Bran continued, wholly unconcerned, undaunted. “Is thinking that there is only this god, or that god. All gods are real, but only some are truly powerful, and they all have their own plans.”

“To hell with their bloody plans, brother.” Jon had to raise his voice now, the howl in his ears fast becoming deafening. “My plan is to get you out of here and keep you safe.”

“You are a dragon, Jon, be a dragon.”

Jon felt his blood run cold, his sudden chill having little to do with the cold rising around him. He did not know why the words had such an effect on him—but it was as if he had been hit with an incantation, and he was left numb in the wake of it. “What?”
“The Night King doesn’t want to kill you, Jon, he wants to recruit you.”

“Recruit me?”

Bran nodded. “With you under his sway—an avatar for the god of fire and the gods of his own creator, he would be unstoppable. With you, he could cross the Narrow Sea and cast the entire world into darkness. Complete his dread purpose once and for all.”

Jon felt limp, simply as if he had taken a blow to the head. “Bran, what are you—” he stopped, shaking his head. “But… Daenerys. What of her? You told me—”

“Daenerys is much too powerful,” Bran replied curtly, as if it were plain as day. “She is caustic to him. She is his mortal enemy, not you.”

“Does he… does he know this?” Jon asked weakly.

“I don’t know, but I think the answer to be ‘no’.” Bran looked away, his hair swaying in the wind. “I’ve told you once before that the Night King was once a man, and men are arrogant. Especially powerful men. He may think himself with no real mortal enemy, though he tried to seek Daenerys out in the past. So… who is to say?”

Jon’s heart felt as though it had restarted, a dangerous hope building in his chest. “What must I do?”

“Close your eyes, Jon,” Bran repeated his earlier command. “Close your eyes and think of the dragons, think of your dragon.”

“I have no dragon,” he argued, shaking his head furiously.

“You have communed with at least one, correct?” Bran asked mildly.

“Briefly.”
“And you have had dreams… queer dreams where you soar above the trees and feel as vast as the sky?”

Jon hesitated. He had been having those dreams most every night.

Bran quirked another, queer smile. “I used to dream I was Summer. But those were no mere dreams, brother.”

Jon licked his lips, hands clenching at his sides. “I had… I had wolf dreams, too. But not in a long while… until last night.”

Bran’s eyes went wide at that, as if he were immeasurably pleased. “And what did you see, brother?”

The wind was a ghastly racket, the snow whipping and abrading, turning to ice and biting into his cheeks. Behind him, he heard Sam shiver and The Hound shift uneasily. “A host of animals… we were running and running, and then we came upon a cairn.”

Bran gave a wan smile, looking away for a time, his face seeming as if all was right with the world. “Close your eyes, Jon, and find your dragon. You must tell him to go there, to that carin. Him and the queen.”

“I have no idea where it might be,” Jon protested.

“You don’t know,” Bran said, so quietly Jon had to strain to hear. “But Ghost does.”

Not for the first time, Jon felt his blood run icy in his veins, his skin prickle with the eeriness of it. He had not seen Ghost in days. He had assumed that his restive wolf had gone hunting, to run out some of his nerves before the battle.

Jon looked at this strange man who used to be his brother— this purveyor of magic and mythos that seemed to be their one, frail hope against the mighty threat that faced them now. He looked so small— shrunken and gaunt like a sapling in poisoned soil. He wondered if the Bran he knew would ever return to him. If he would ever again muss his little brother’s hair and tell him to go easy on the custard pies.
No. That world was gone. That world and that Bran… all gone. Some force beyond reckoning had claimed his little brother, and some force had returned Jon Snow from the void. Perhaps they were one and the same. Perhaps this force meant to forge a new world from the bitter ashes.

Jon sighed, his heart as heavy as a stone, and closed his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

*peeks around corner* ahem.

so, i'm sorry. this is just ridiculous. i just got bogged down. not just with this story in particular, but just with life. i looked to other projects to distract me. but whatever. i'm on a fucking tear right now and am determined to finish this before the series finale. it'll be weird publishing chapters while the show is going on, but eh. we'll see what happens.

hope you like, loves. i'm sorry again for the horrendous wait. forgive me?

thank you to the Tarts for their patience and humor-- and most of all their love. thank you very much to Justwanderingneverlost for the amazing mood board, once again, and thank you SO MUCH to hardlyfatal for the guidance and the polishing.

(it's kind of imperative that i hear from y'all, at this point. i mean, it's gonna get done either way, but holy shit it's been so long i'm a bit of a nervous wreck about it.)
Chapter Summary

For the first time since he had watched Daenerys swoop over that frozen lake a lifetime ago, he felt a wild blaze of hope and love scorch his heart, tempering it true, steeling it for the fight that lay ahead. He looked to his right, where Arya rode beside him-- his precious little sister, returned to him, impossibly, to fight by his side. She wore an expression of sheer wonder, and he knew that the same hope that had taken root in him had flared to life within her.

The horde of creatures rushed past their little cadre, clashing savagely with the force that tailed them. Jon glanced over his shoulder, watching the carnage unfold-- all of life answering the call to defeat death once and for all.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
She was engulfed in a swirl of wind, ice and fog. The gale was so powerful it took her breath. Dany hunkered down against Drogon’s scales, squeezing her thighs, gripping his spikes with every drop of strength left to her.

They tumbled through a wild current of a furious storm, lightning blaring and blinding, leaving phosphenes that glowed harshly behind her eyelids. She gritted her teeth, clenched her eyes shut, as her son struggled to find the air under his wings.
She thought she heard Drogon roar in frustration, but she couldn’t be sure, the din of the undead flock and the frothing sea of cloud and wind drowning out all else. She felt the birds diving for her, scraping her scalp with razor sharp talons, tugging at her hair with the strength of the dead, pinging against the plate of her armor. She shouted in pain, in fury, but could do nothing to stem the tide.

There was a pulse of heat above her, and the cloud of revenants was ripped asunder in a flash of fire. She cracked her eyes open, her teeth chattering, and watched as Rhaegal dived to her left, chasing their attackers downward through the ether.

Her courage quickened at the sight, and she dared to lean to the side, to see if she could glean any of what was happening below.

There was a break in the clouds and she could just see the massive trail of birds diving, finding her and her sons too fearsome a target, instead making for her armies-- for their armies.

She threw herself forward with a wild shout, and followed her son as he plummeted to the earth.

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_The howl of wind is deafening, lightning cracking and pulsing. Maddening. He feels fear, anger, wrath. He lets out a glut of flame and all is revealed. The sting of beak and claw, the clamor of birds innumerable._

_He is swept up in a tide of cloud and ice. He shakes his head, cries out in anguish. His mother clings to his brother’s hide as they tumble through the sky._

_He roars out once more, his fiery breath slicing through the cloak of carrion birds. They part like oil on water and dive for the earth in retreat. And he follows, bloodlust swamping every nerve and muscle until--_

Jon took in a great, rattling breath, his skin clammy as a rain-wet rock. “Daenerys!” he gasped. “Daenerys-- she’s in trouble!”

Bran blinked at him mildly as his vision swam back into focus. What was Bran doing here? And
“Where were they? “What did you see, brother?”

“I can’t--” Jon panted, feeling as though he’d sprinted a league, as if he was slowly falling back into his own skin like sand through an hourglass. His chest was heaving, the wind deafening in his ears, overwhelming, stealing the air from his lungs. He could still feel the crackle of electricity flowing over his skin, the power of fire within his breast. “I have to help her!”

“Then help her,” Bran responded. His brother looked to Sam and inclined his head. Sam stepped forward silently and pushed Bran closer to him. “What did you see?”

“A storm,” he managed, shaking his head to clear it of the strange fog that had filled it. “A terrible storm… and birds. Thousands of them. They’re coming… they’re coming here, I think.”

Bran took his hand in his own and touched the white bark of the heart tree with the other. “Daenerys Targaryen, also known as Daenerys Stormborn,” Bran intoned as he closed his eyes.

“Bran, what is--”

“Close your eyes, brother,” Bran ordered, more stern than Jon had ever heard him. “I need you to help me. Take me to where you were.”

Jon did as Bran requested after a moment, but the wail of the wind, the creak of the trees, the shouts and screams of his people fleeing his home, their home… it was too much. He’d never be able to focus enough, to bring himself back--

_He lurches back with a roar as the birds circle over the ranks of men and horses on the ground. Chaos scatters below, the ice and wind and the assault of hellion beasts from above and about too much._

_He cries out in anguish and thrusts himself forward with a mighty beat of his wings, desperate to get to him, to his mother, but his senses are swamped, all of his reality in a freefall--_
‘West,’ he hears the whisper in his head, but it is not his mother’s voice as it always was. He
whips his head around, blinking away the bite of sleet and snow.

Far on the horizon, a tower of lightning swirls, high upon a treeless hill, encircled by stones as old
as the bones of the earth.

He feels his blood sing at the sound of a lonesome, grievous wail slicing through the racket of
storm and siege. The howl of some mighty creature, the last of its kind, calling to whoever would
listen.

‘Go!’ yet another voice cries in his head, and he does. Or tries.

Jon didn’t know when or how it happened, but he was looking to the roiling sky. The branches of
the trees were snapping and breaking above him, the tops of them nearly bent to the ground. He
was gasping for air, his skin damp and stinging in a wind so cold he could scarcely conceive of it.

He was suddenly hoisted onto his feet by his armpits, set upon wobbly legs. “We have to go, Your
Grace!” The Hound shouted at him as he slapped him gently on his cheeks with the back of his
gloved hands. “This is bad, but something tells me that it’s only going to get worse!”

Jon nodded dumbly, still not fully understanding what had happened… what was happening even
now. He spotted his brother, sat still as stone next to the heart tree and lunged forward. “Bran! We
have to--”

“No, Jon!” Sam stepped into his path, pushing a hand into his chest so hard Jon nearly reeled on
his weakened legs. Sam gulped, his eyes wide and panicked. “He’s not to be disturbed!”

“Fuck that, Sam, we need to get the hell out of here!”

“I’ll take care of him, Jon!” Sam yelled. “We’ve… we’ve been planning this a long time. You have
to leave! Now!”

“I’m not bloody leaving you and my brother!” Jon protested hotly, his strength flooding back into
him in a heady rush. “You’re mad to think--"
“Sandor Clegane!” Sam yelled over him, his voice nearly lost in the gale. “You are sworn to protect the king at any and all costs, are you not?”

Jon blinked and looked back at the Hound, who was looking stony and serious, but his hands twitched at his sides, as if he were just resisting the urge to reach out and grab Jon by the collar like a naughty child.

“You can’t be serious, Sam!”

Sam opened his mouth to protest further, when there came a mighty rumble and a terrible, earsplitting ‘crack’ that sounded as if the earth itself had snapped in two.

“We have to get the fuck out of here, Snow!” The Hound growled loudly, his broad palm now tight on his shoulder.

“Your people are in the real danger, Jon!” Sam screamed, now fully desperate. “Your sisters, your wife! Get the hells out of here before we’re all lost!”

Screams filtered through the roar of the storm as Jon felt his heart plummet through his belly. He hesitated a moment longer, taking in one, last lingering look at the refuge of his ancestors, the home of the gods of his father. Then he stepped forward, brushing his hand over Bran’s cold brow. His brother did not stir. He turned to Sam and yanked him into a crushing, clinging hug, tears pricking his eyes.

“Take care of yourself, Sam.”

“And you, Snow,” Sam answered, giving him a sad, watery grin as they broke apart.

Feeling as though his feet were made of lead, Jon finally turned away.

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“Arya!” came Sansa’s worried cry as she shouldered to the front of the ranks of Unsullied. “What are you doing here? What’s going on?”
Sweat clung to every pore, her leathers soaked and chafing. With every pace she had sprinted into the gloomy depths of the crypts, her unrest had grown and grown. Her very bones were humming with it by the time she had reached her destination.

“We have to leave!” Arya shouted, gripping the pommel of her sword. “Now!”

“Where’s Jon?” Sansa asked, craning her neck, pale skin made even paler with fear. “What’s--”

“I can’t explain! We need to leave, now!”

And that’s when she heard it, the groaning of stone and earth, the hiss of ancient grave dust scattered from the shoulders of her ancestors’ sentinels. The dry crack of ruined rock, tumbling to the packed dirt of the floor.

A woman from the rear of the crowd screamed, and her fear spread among all those gathered like a noxious fume.

Then the corridor came alive with the jostling of many bodies, the shouts and cries of many mouths. Arya watched in abject terror as the statue next to her exploded into dust and the knotty hand of some ghoul appeared from the ether.

“Everyone with me! Now!” Sansa bellowed as Brienne stepped forward and caught her arm, Podrick close behind with Tyrion.

The Unsullied guards were struggling against the tide of panic, unsure of what their orders were. The horses were screaming and rearing, some breaking free and fleeing up the sloped corridor.

Arya turned and shoved her way to the front of the retreating throng. She could hear the screeches of her ancestors, come from their resting places to drag their own blood into bondage.

The corridors were echoing with noise-- the scream of horses and the yelling of babes, the cries of men and women alike and the shouts of the Unsullied, vainly trying to keep the retreat in order in a foreign tongue.
Arya’s heart sunk as she recognized the sound of death throes, as the people she was tasked to protect fell under the infernal hands of the dead brought back to life.

Arya halted in her retreat, turning to see where her sister was. Sansa was being almost bodily dragged by Brienne, while Podrick sheltered Tyrion with his arm and a bare blade. Gilly and Little Sam, Missandei and Varys were huddled under a shelter of Unsullied shields, ashen and shaken to the core.

Some who were wiser, were coalescing around other Unsullied soldiers, while still others made a mad dash for it, jumping upon frightened horses, breaking through the line, escaping narrowly while their fellows were crushed under the hooves.

A tallow-colored hand struck out from the foot of a tomb, going for Brienne. The woman swung, but her aim was off among the press, and Sansa’s cloak was caught in its grisly knuckles. Brienne shouted as Sansa was yanked from her grasp, thrown at the feet of a corpse barely more than tendon and ashy bone, resplendent in bronze and gold.

Arya leapt through the throng as her sister screamed, her Valyrian blade drawn and ready. The skeleton let out a rasping, chilling cry, raising a short-bladed sword, readying to strike. Arya ducked, spun, and drove the catspaw blade to the hilt into its chest.

The creature wailed and fell to pieces at her feet. Arya grabbed her sister’s wrist and tugged her to her feet.

The press grew more and more desperate with every passing breath. Arya never let go of her sister’s hand as the splitting of stone and the screams of multitudes rang in her ears.

Her heart leapt into her throat as she saw the dull blue glimmer of the entrance finally float into view. She had to choke back her gasp of relief when the shadow of a skeleton appeared in front of it, taking the legs from under a fleeing horse with a scream.

And then two more appeared, then four more, taking out a knot of refugees, another horse, a woman and babe.

Arya skidded to a halt, her lungs ruined, all strength and breath leaving her. She knew she should order the people to halt, to turn back… but then what?
Some followed her lead, slowing to a stop behind her to look on in horrifying wonder at the carnage before them. But many more pressed forward, the Unsullied forming a wall of shield and spear as best they could, but the numbers of the dead were too great, their training too poor to contend with such an enemy.

The dead sprung up around them like weeds, the noise echoing in her head so gruesome and terrible she had to close her eyes, had to draw both her blades and square her feet, let out a slow breath through her nose.

*What do we say to the god of death?*

Her eyes snapped open, the voice of Syrio Forel ringing in her head as clear and bright as if he stood right next to her. Her heart shuddered to a halt at what she saw.

The outline of a man, most certainly of the living, was smashing through the swelling sea of the undead with a mighty hammer. And then there was another with a flaming sword all alight, sending the revenants screaming into ash and smoke. And then another, and another.

“Come on!” Arya shouted at the others and they moved forward once again. This time Arya and Brienne took up the head of the column, slicing through any dead that escaped the fury of steel and fire at the mouth of the crypts.

“GENDRY!” Arya roared in sudden fear and recognition as she came more into the light. A body had lurched forward and wrapped its gnarled fingers around Gendry’s neck, sending him sputtering to the ground.

She pounced upon the figure, driving her knife into its spine. The creature shrieked and fell still and Gendry threw the thing off him, panting for air.

Arya sat frozen in horror as she looked upon the sunken, waxy face of a woman’s visage she knew only from stone, face twisted in torment, her wide, unseeing eyes fading from blue to black.

“C’mon,” Gendry whispered to her, hauling her up by her arm. “We have to go, c’mon.”
She shook her head slowly, her brain misfiring, fear and anger and disgust swirling within her heart to create a potent mixture that ran hot and blazing through her veins.

Suddenly, Sansa was next to her, tears standing in her eyes. “Come on, Arya,” she whispered, her voice somehow cutting through the yells of men and women, the braying of horses, the clash of steel on bone, the howl of the wind… the screams of the dead, finally put to rest forevermore.

“I’m sorry.” Arya cried, her eyes heated and her heart pounding, her fingers digging into Sansa’s wrists. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t— what will Jon—”

“Jon loves you,” Sansa interrupted sternly, though her voice was a bit broken. “That is not Aunt Lyanna. She’s gone. Now, come. We have to go, Arya.”

“Come on!” someone shouted to her left. She looked over her shoulder and saw Jorah Mormont swing his blade into yet another revenant. The last of the survivors had already scattered to who knew where, Arya realized with some horror. Only her, her sister, Tyrion, Gilly and her babe, Missandei and Varys were huddled just beyond the entrance, with Gendry still clutching her arm in urgency. Jorah, Tormund, Beric, Edd Tollett, even Davos and now Brienne, Podrick and a handful of Unsullied were holding off the dead, their numbers dwindling under their blades. But Arya knew better than to think it would stay that way— the crypts of Winterfell were deep and ancient. There were many more on their way, no doubt.

She was supposed to protect them, to lead them out and to safety and she had failed. They were dead or as good as, now. And her aunt … what had she done to her own blood?

“We need to get you out of here!” Davos yelled, swinging his blade clumsily.

“Aye, and find where ever the bloody hell King Crow ran off to!” Tormund bellowed, sending an arrow into the eye of another footsoldier.

“I know where he is!” Arya shouted, suddenly coming back to her senses, her purpose returning to her and girding her nerves. “He’s in the godswood!”

“Well, let’s bloody get a move on then!” Beric shouted, striding over to her and hoisting her to her feet.
Arya turned to Gendry, grabbed him by the hem of his tunic and yanked him closer to her, ensuring that he could see the fire of promise in her eyes. “You get my sister and the others out of here and to White Harbor. Find the horses at the south gate, if they’re still there. There should be boats waiting at the White Knife, but maybe not anymore.” She felt a twinge of dread twist in her belly, a clot of shame build in her throat. Gods, what had she done? “But whatever you do, you get them there.”

Gendry looked pale, maybe a bit stricken, but he nodded, licking his lips. “What about you?”

“I need to find Jon,” she replied calmly. “I don’t know what is going to happen, but he’s not going to White Harbor, I can feel it. And I’m not letting him go alone.”

“You can’t!” Sansa interjected. “We need to stick together!”

“The little wolf’s right, lass,” Tormund cut in, “we all know Jon Snow better than to think that he’s retreating like a good fancy lad, and I’d rather the little wolf come with us than try to fight her on it.”

“Besides, fuck all is going to plan as it is!” Edd shouted above the rising winds. “But we have to leave now, before we all freeze to death!”

“Aye, and before the dead bring reinforcements!” Davos added, maybe a bit frantic. Arya could just make out the distant echo of dry, cracking bone, of the gasping rattle of the dead trying to draw breath through putrid mouths.

Arya stepped forward and pressed her mouth to Gendry’s own. It was dry, chaste, clumsy, nothing very romantic about it, but it was all she could do at that moment, her heart was so locked up, her brain drowning in adrenaline. “Get them out of here,” she told him in a low, lethal voice. “And see to yourself, too, fool.”

Gendry managed to crack a smile, before stepping away and hefting his hammer. “As my lady wishes.”

Her heart, already sore and exhausted from all the anguish it had gone through that night, almost broke.
She took a great, bracing breath and picked her dagger up from the ground. She wiped the black, gummy blood from it with her sleeve.

“If you aim to go with Jon, let me go with Gendry and the Lady Stark,” Davos said as he stepped forward, red-faced and panting a little. “I might be a shit soldier, but I know a thing or two about sneaking around and going unnoticed.”

“A very imperative skill in such a quest, I venture,” Tyrion cut in, his spell of uncharacteristic muteness seemingly broken.

Arya nodded. With Davos, Gendry, and the score of Unsullied left to them, she felt much better about their escape.

“Let me go with you,” Podrick pleaded. “I can help, and Lady Brienne is better paired with the king--”

“Pod!” came Brienne’s warning shout.

“My lady--”

“We have to get the fuck out of here, or we’re all going to fucking die! LET’S GO!” Edd bellowed, his eyes shifting from the roiling, purple sky above, to the shadowy mouth of the crypts.

“Go!” Arya told Podrick, done with negotiations. “Go! All of you!”

Sansa wrapped her up in a fierce embrace. It was all too brief, but it spoke volumes. As her sister and the others turned to leave, Brienne went to follow and Arya caught up her arm. “No.”

“My lady, I must follow the king’s orders--”

“The king’s orders don’t bloody well apply anymore!” Tormund shouted at her as he shouldered his bow and leapt onto one of the half dozen or so horses that had managed to be kept under the heel of the few Unsullied who knew how to handle them.
“Jon needs you and that sword of yours more than they do, now,” Arya told her, just a tad more sedately. “Let them go, and come with us.”

Brienne glanced to the battlements, where the red glare of fire was rimming the black stone, and the awful racket of battle could be heard on the other side. Finally, she nodded, looking defeated for only a breath before her spine straightened and she went to a horse.

Arya took one, last moment to look back at the crypts, the final home to countless generations of her family. The direwolves on either side, meant as sentinels to such a sacred, hallowed place, were now in a pile of rubble among the blood, mud, and snow.

She grabbed at the reins of a rearing mare, and swung herself into the saddle.

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The birds reached them first.

They raced ahead of a winged shadow tearing through the clouds, bellowing red-hot plumes of flame in their wake. Many of them fell into the mud and snow in a smoking heap, but many more dived through the lines like missiles.

All Jaime could hear were the screams of horses, the shouts of terrified men, the cacophony of the undead horde from above. All he could smell was the smoke of pitch-fires, the putrid flesh of their enemies, the shit and piss of his men as fear took on its icy grip. All he could see was the smear of snow and soot, the blur of clacking beaks and flying feathers.

It was all he could do to slash and swing his sword blindly, catching half a dozen of the fragile revenants only for a dozen more to take their place. His horse roared and reared under him, and he had to lunge forward in the saddle to stay upright, had to pull savagely on the reins to keep his horse from simply bolting into the dissolving fray around him.

He felt a sudden heat near his left cheek and he dared look up. Bronn was there, thrusting a torch nearly into his face.
“We have to get the fuck out of here, Kingslayer!” Bronn shouted over the tumult. The birds swerved around them to avoid the torch. Some weren’t fast enough and caught like tinder, squawking in despair as they fell.

Jaime shook his head and pointed to the flame that provided such a small but vital refuge from the assault. “Where did you get a bloody torch?”

It was Bronn’s turn to shake his head. “Everyone has one, you bloody idiot! In their field packs! But who gives a fuck? We need to--”

Jaime cursed and wheeled his frantic horse around, snatching the torch from Bronn’s hand. He dimly heard his companion’s angered shout as he made his way to the back of his wavering lines. The rear ranks were thin already, many men running for it or else having little choice as their mounts sped away from the chaos.

Another dragon swooped low, its breath nearly singing the top of his hair as it roared, slicing through the birds as if they were naught but a scrap of cloud.

Jaime yanked his horse to a stop and waved the torch high over his head. “TORCHES!” He bellowed as he kicked his horse through the ranks as fast as he could.

His horse reared with a scream as another came crashing to the ground in his path, pecked alive by rotting creatures.

But still, he went on. “TORCHES! LIGHT YOUR FUCKING TORCHES!”

Slowly, too slowly, the ember halos flared into life around him. He could hear others shouting, waving their fires to signal their fellow soldiers.

The birds thinned, drew upward. The dragons swooped in hungrily, like sharks after a school of fish, and Jaime almost let himself breathe.

A bone-chilling cry rent the air, a trumpet of some creature that had long been dead from the world. Then he heard the groaning of wood, the cracking of timber, the yells and cries of men in the distance.
He looked to the front lines, where the smoke was black and boiling, the flames feeding it dying under the ever approaching storm. And the palisades, tall and imposing and slick with soot and suet, were bending and bowing. He could just make out the forms of men leaping from the scaffolding, shouting out in terror.

And there, the outline of a hulking, man-like creature, beating the walls with boulder-sized fists flashed before him in a pearly strobe of lightning. Then another flash, and the walls came down with a sickening ‘crash’ that chilled his blood. Then three, four, a dozen gigantic creatures with tusks as long a tree trunks came thundering through the breach. Great bears dashed through their legs-- shadow cats and giant wolves, all the number of fearsome, half-rotted creatures with eyes the color of stars.

The wild vanguard smashed through the stolid lines of Unsullied as if they were naught but a pile of pebbles. The Dothraki horde rose up in a wild racket, their war cries almost enough to blot out the rest of it as they charged forward, hungry for death and glory.

“DRAW RANK!” Jaime screamed. “FALL BACK! TO ME! TO ME!”

Daenerys and her dragons circled back, sending knives of flame into the tide of creatures, as his men turned, coalesced around him. “SHIELDS!” The clatter of shields and spears echoed through the gale and Jaime wheeled his horse to and fro.

“Men of Westeros!” he cried, his throat stinging with smoke. He pointed ahead, where the Dothraki were rolling over the Night King’s welcoming party like water over a stone. “Are you willing to let a foreign army do your fighting for you?”

Angry shouts met his question. He kicked his horse into a canter. An explosion rang in the distance, Daenerys no doubt lighting the fuckers up, but he did not turn to see. “Your fathers, your fathers’ fathers, all the way back to the founding of the world-- no one has faced a foe like the one we do today! But our foe has never faced us! Northmen!” A mighty shout. “Westermen!” Another. “Men of the Vale!” Swords clattered on breast plates. “Let’s give them hell!”

Bronn slid his horse to a halt in front of him as his men readied themselves. Jaime’s heart was pounding, his blood roaring in his ears as he prepared himself for death. “Just what do you think it going to happen when that storm hits us?” Bronn shouted at him, pointing at the mighty thunderhead still bearing down upon them. “Your little speech isn’t going to hold things together after that, and we’ll all fucking die!”
“What do you expect me to do?” Jaime spat, waving an arm to the battlefield at large. “Leave my men? Order a retreat while the Dothraki and the Unsullied slow the dead down for us?”

“Yes!” Bronn answered, his expression a little wild. “Winterfell has already lit the fires! They’re bloody running, and so should we!”

Jaime felt his blood run cold, his heart shudder to a halt within his chest. He looked to his right, where he could just see the angry glare of the signal fire bleeding into the black sky. He looked back north, where the storm was beginning to swallow up the first ranks. He could hear the ‘pop’ of wood freezing, the death rattle of horses, of men.

He leaned forward and grasped the front of Bronn’s hauberk.

“Get the men into retreat!” he screamed, the wind nearly deafening. “Bear southeast and get to the river! Cover the path of any refugees!”

“And what exactly are you going to do?” Bronn snapped back, looking entirely disgusted and all-too knowing at the same time.

Jaime drew his reins in, glancing back south, and then to the lines ahead, dissolving into chaos. “I don’t know.” With that, he nodded to his old companion for perhaps the last time and kicked his horse into a gallop.

+++ Sam looked at his friend, lifeless and white-eyed next to the great heart tree.

The core of the storm was almost upon them, the wind nearing the intolerable. Sam was beyond shivering now, his extremities long since gone numb.

“I must help them, Sam,” Bran had told him too many times. “I can only help them if I can fly.”

Sam had argued, had protested until he felt as though he were yelling into the void. Had sworn until he was blue in the face, but it all fell upon deaf ears. “The Old Gods chose me. The Lord of Light
chose Daenerys. And they both chose my brother. The dragon has three heads, Sam. I cannot leave the seat of my power.”

Bran had insisted that the effort would kill him. That he would forever be lost in the ether of time, never to return. That when his brother and the queen struck the killing blow, they would be delivering it to him as well.

It was a load of horse shit, in Sam’s humble opinion.

Sam had spent nearly a year wading through horse shit within the vaulted halls of the Citadel, after all, he was well versed in it.

“Jon can never know.” Bran had rightfully insisted. “He will never complete his quest if he knows.”

That was one thing him and Sam could agree on, anyway.

Sam sighed, feeling the immense weight of prophecy and magic and gods and demons settle ever deeper into his bones. It was too much for him to stomach. But there was one thing Sam did know.

If he abandoned Bran now, he would surely die. In some strange magical binding or no, the dead or the cold would find him eventually. He could perish before his so-called final purpose was complete, and then the world would truly be without hope. If he abandoned Bran now, he would never forgive himself.

He sighed heavily, pulling the tasseled key from his coat and shuffled to the gates of the godswood, ensuring that Jon was well away. He pulled the heavy wrought iron gates shut, struggling mightily in the wind. He struggled even worse with the lock, but eventually the gates were sealed, and their last line of defense was set.

“The godswood has ancient protections,” Bran had tried to assure him. “It will protect me and only me for as long as I need it.”

Maybe that was true, maybe it wasn’t. Sam wasn’t going to test it.
He sat upon a nearby stone with a huff, and reached to his left, brushing snow and leaflitter away to reveal a gleaming sword—Heartsbane, the sword of his father and countless fathers before that.

Sam laid it across his knees, the metal as cold as death, even through his fur-lined leather breeches. He studied the whorls of the spellfire, the grain of an ancient alloy that could banish death itself.

His father never deserved such a sword. A petty, mean-hearted man who turned on his own son, had turned on his sworn liege lady for a few gold dragons, Sam had no doubt. The magnificent blade in his lap perhaps deserved a more worthy wielder than himself, but its new purpose could not be more grand.

Sam squeezed a hand over the shiny leather of the pommel. It had been recently replaced, no doubt, for it looked as if it had never once been used.

How much blood lived within the fullers? How many enemies of his house, deserving or no, had met their maker at the edge of this blade?

Dragonfire had made this sword centuries ago, and dragonfire flooded the moors of the North just outside the walls.

Sam sighed again, the racket of the storm drowning his thoughts, the fading noises of the evacuation beyond the gates setting him at ease and on edge all at once. He closed his eyes, feeling ice curl and grow in his moustache. He thought of many things—of Jon and Grenn and Edd and Pyp, of his sister and mother, but one image blazed behind his eyes like a watchfire.

Gilly. Gilly with the sun in her hair, with her tongue in her teeth as she scribbled out notes in her untidy scrawl. Gilly with Little Sam bouncing on her hip. Little Sam beaming and babbling and clapping his chubby little hands together.

“Forgive me,” he muttered, a tear freezing painfully on his cheek. He heaved himself to his feet, fingers curling around the only thing standing between him and death.

+++ 

The cold in his lungs was cauterizing. He felt made of lead, his limbs lashed to a face of stone. The Hound yanked him by the elbow, grunting in impatience as they jogged through a torrent of wind
and ice.

There was a roar and a distant smashing of timber, the terrified screams of men and horses.

He felt his brain spark, catching fire in the light of the chaos that was brewing around him.

“The south gates!” Jon shouted at his companion. “There are supposed to be horses!”

The Hound looked grim. “If they are still there, Snow, I’ll eat my own damn hand.”

Jon felt his stomach bottom out, knowing in the bleakest reaches of his heart that Clegane spoke true.

He could barely see anything, the whip of snow blinding, the thrash of the gale almost too much to bare. He could just hear the muffled sounds of people fleeing, but could not discern from where. He could barely make out where he was. He thought he saw the crucible of the forge to his left, but he couldn’t be sure.

Despair was leeching in as quick as the cold, and he reached for his sword at the sound of approaching horses. Clegane, mouth pressed into a furious line, did the same, looking ready to taste blood, living or no.

“JON!” came a scream, floating through the clamor like a cork in a stream. “JON!”

“ARYA?” Jon called back, lowering his sword. A horse came crashing through the soup of cloud and ice, screaming and terrified, his little sister pulling up on the reins in front of him.

“Fuck,” Jon shouted as he stumbled forward, relieved beyond measure. “Gods, Arya, what is going on? Where are Sansa and the others--”

“Can’t talk now, Snow!” Another voice called through the racket and Jon looked over his shoulder, watching as Tormund pulled up alongside him, with Beric, Jorah, Brienne, and Edd coming to a halt in his wake. “We’ve got to get the fuck out of here!”
“The others are fine,” Arya shouted over at him. “We’re here for you, brother. We know you aren’t going to White Harbor.”

“Aye, and you’d be a bloody fool to think we aren’t going with your crazy ass, Snow!” Tormund bellowed, yanking on a rope he was holding. Two terrified horses stumbled into the circle, rearing and half-mad. If any one of the people present were lesser riders, they’d be thrown off within a breath.

Jon felt the protest rise in his throat, but his eyes tracked to every last one of his companions, faces lined with determination, eyes steely in the face of almost certain death, and knew there would be no deterring them.

He sheathed his sword and grabbed hold of the reins of one of the horses and yanked him into submission, pressing a firm hand on his snout, and swung himself up into the saddle.

The Hound had a bit more of a difficult time mounting his own steed, but as soon as he was upright in the saddle, Jon kicked harshly and his horse fled with little more ado, desperate to get away as it was.

They flew through the empty bones of Winterfell, and, impossibly, the wind kicked up around them. The thatch of workshops ripped apart and swirled in the eddies of the tumult. The ash and embers of signal fires swirled in the current, stinging his eyes, his lungs. He could hear nothing, see nothing, pushing his horse onward by the sheer weight of the knowledge of his home, hoping against all hope that his instincts were right, that he was not leading them to certain death.

Then he felt it— the same strange thing he had felt when watching the world from the eyes of a dragon, wreathed in cloud and wind. The prickle of static, the strange metallic tang of storm on his tongue. He heard a mighty crack, felt a pulse of a bleak wind.

He dared look to the sky, only to see the darkness of the fearsome thunderhead he had witnessed not moments before bearing down on them impossibly, unnaturally fast. Another ‘crack’ and a strobe of lightning, and he could see the black imprints of two dragons flash upon the molten cloud.

His heart seized, his hands went numb. He choked on a scream, his throat burning and burning. *What were they doing? Why had they not fled to the cairn?*
'Jon!' He tore his eyes away, looking ahead as the form of the southern gates came into view.

There were people there, huddled in a dark knot before the splintered gates, but a cold certitude took hold of him.

He drew his sword, and he dimly heard his companions follow suit. He kicked his horse, knowing it was of little use. The beast was frothing at the mouth, already teetering on the limits of his strength.

He lowered his blade, cutting through the blue-eyed ghouls that were once his own people. His horse reared and raved as one of them caught hold of his bridle, pulling his head down to topple him. Jon roared as he brought his blade down onto his attacker-- a woman no older than Sansa. She fell away with a shriek and his horse bounded forward, tampling the undead guard under his sharp hooves.

He glanced behind his shoulder, watching as his companions fought their way through one by one. He almost-- *almost* -- allowed himself an instant of relief as he saw them all escape, but it was all too brief. A blinding flash of blue split the air with a crash so deafening it was a wonder he heard it-- a chill so cold it was a wonder he felt it.

The bolt came down and sliced through the curtain wall of Winterfell like a child toppling his blocks. The rear legs of Tormund’s horse escaped with just a breath of clearance before it could be swallowed by the tide of stone and mortar.

Jon willed himself to go numb, to stay solid and unfeeling though grief bubbled under his skin, ready to boil over any moment and take him. His horse thundered through the snow and frost, making for the black line of the Wolfswood ahead.

Jon lowered himself over the neck of his horse, readying himself for a long journey ahead, not fully understanding where he was going. ‘*West*’ the voice had said, so that’s where he went.

There was a piercing cry and he heard Arya swear from his left. She was looking over her shoulder, back to where their home was being ripped asunder. Jon followed her gaze, and yanked back on his horse’s reins so hard he nearly reeled into the snow.

He wanted to shout her name, but his voice had fled, his lungs hanging shriveled and useless
within his chest as he looked helplessly into the sky.

+++ 

Dany fought her sons for control.

Rhaegal seemed a creature possessed. He had been acting queer ever since they had taken flight, but his behavior was reaching the absurd.

The birds were well scattered, now, and she ordered her sons back to the lines, where an undead horde of Northern animals had downed the palisades, were smashing through the Unsullied. The core of the storm was dangerously close, swallowing up the line of fires that protected their armies, but she could not leave them, could not abandon her people.

They dove and swirled, bathing the vanguard in furious fire, but all the while Rhaegal was distracted, watching as his brother circled above and below, calling out to Drogon in a language Daenerys did not understand.

Drogon would list, drift to the west, and Daenerys would dig her heels in, draw the tether that held them together tighter and tighter. Rhaegal would answer with a glut of flame and a furious roar.

Her children were tired. The storm buffeting them, making their flight arduous. She kept on, though the beasts below poured in like water through the splintered palisades, though more and more dead piled up behind them. Though the storm enveloped them now, the static crackling in her hair, between her teeth.

She shouted in desperation, Drogon growing ever restive, ever defiant beneath her. Her people were being swallowed whole. The press was now knifing through, the dead and the living too intermingled to safely attack. Her Dothraki fought as fierce as ever, below, their war cries so loud even she could hear them from her faraway vantage, but it would not be enough.

She finally threw herself forward, her face stinging with freezing tears, heading to Winterfell, where the signal fire was still blazing even through the storm.

*Jon, gods, where are you?*
Her heart blackened and crumbled as she swooped over the castle. Ruination and destruction was all she could see, dead things already finding their way in.

A thunderous ‘crack’ rang through the air and a bolt of blue splintered through the cloud, down and down, striking the south wall of Winterfell, the point of evacuation for the castle.

She screamed, grief and fear ripping through her. Drogon reeled back, ready to flee. “NO!” she roared. She gritted her teeth to the point of pain, grasped her son’s spikes in desperate strength. ‘Jon, we must find Jon,’ she told her son with all the power left to her.

Drogon yelled out in irritation, but lunged forward, and they were swallowed by wind and noise.

+++

“Where are you going?! ”

Jon hardly heard the shouts and protests of his companions, digging his heels cruelly into his horses sides, all senses snapping to the dark form pulsing before a backdrop of hellish lightning brewing and spitting from the core of the thunderhead.

“DANY!” he bellowed, as if she would be able to hear him, galloping straight back from where they came as if he would be able to leap from his horse and snatch her from the fray.

Be a dragon, Jon.

Jon pulled back on his reins, watching helplessly as the shape of Drogon was swallowed up by the frothing center of the storm. He closed his eyes, threw his thoughts to the sky.

+++

Dany wrenched her eyes shut, the core of the storm washing over them. She was spinning and spinning, her son calling out in despair. The lightning snapped and crackled, dangerously close.
‘Fly, my son, fly!’

Drogon bucked and thrashed beneath her and she held on with every last shred of will she could conjure, inwardly thanking all those gods she did not believe in that Tormund had gifted her the sealskin gloves that gripped her son’s spikes like glue.

She heard Rhaegal’s desperate cry, growing closer and closer, the heat of his breath slicing just above her spine, clashing with a lightning bolt, turning a deep purple. She dared look up, finding that her son had turned back for her and Drogon, had pierced his way through the chaos with the power of his strange fire.

The storm seemed to ground down, slowing and turning inward, ready to strike a killing blow to the parasites within it.

Heartened, Drogon reared up, wings bucking hard under her legs with a mighty flap, finding his purchase in the air once more.

It was slow going, the wind making it a mighty struggle, the lightning leaving tracers on her eyes that left her helpless and nearly blind, but she could feel the electricity in the air, growing and growing.

‘Faster, Drogon! Faster, my son!’ she pleaded. Drogon answered in kind, pushing himself through the maddening current, gaining more and more momentum, but it was still much too slow.

The clouds darkened, the air grew thick and suffocating.

The ‘crack’ that sounded left her breathless, the flash of light making her eyes stream.

When she dared opened her eyes again, they had escaped the fury of the storm.

They were going in the wrong direction. This was not the southern gates of Winterfell, where she wanted nothing more than to leap from Drogon’s shoulders and search for Jon until she had turned over every stone in the North. Nor, she found, was it the way to White Harbor. There were no trails of refugees, no cloak of thick trees beneath her, no fleeing cavalry.
The air was almost… calm. The world eerily silent.

She looked behind her, where the storm raged and raged. She could dimly make out the smear of clashing armies beneath it, the flood of men and horses racing away south, the ruin of a castle she had once thought of as a potential home.

‘No!’ she screamed at Drogon. ‘No! Turn back!’

But no matter how she protested, her son ignored her, seemingly under a spell.

She roared out in defeat, in desolation, beating her fists impotently upon Drogon’s scales, feeling her heart tear in two. The castle she had sworn to protect, the people within, the armies that had followed her into this hell, the father of the impossible, nascent life within her-- the light of her every living hour-- all behind her, and she was helpless to stop it.

She wept.

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“What the fuck is he doing?” Tormund roared at her.

Arya couldn’t answer, couldn’t move, sitting frozen upon her horse as she watched Jon come to a halt before the ruined walls of their home and go still, unmoving in the face of the hellscape that threatened to swamp them at any moment.

“I’m not waiting around to bloody well find out!” The Hound shouted, kicking his horse forward.

Something within her sang in warning. She lunged forward, grabbing Clegane by the elbow as he passed. “Don’t!” she yelled. “Don’t disturb him.”

“What the bloody hells is wrong with you?” Clegane spat. “Disturb him? He’s just bloody sitting there, you damn fool.”
Arya shook her head, squinting her eyes, looking into the tempest of blue and black. “He’s not.”

The Hound was opening his mouth to protest, or to perhaps tell her to fuck off, but it died in his throat as he caught sight of the same thing she was seeing in that moment.

Blindings flashes of deep purple, glimmering through a veil of sooty cloud and icy veins of lightning, pushed its way through the storm. And then the air grew thick, almost still, and then a grand flash of a blazing hue-- a sphere of some queer energy appeared through the fog of the storm for an instant, two dark figures inside. Electricity pinged off it like pebbles off plate mail, cracking and sizzling and then it was gone within a breath.

The storm seemed to have come to a halt during that time, distracted, turning inward, trying to throw off whatever malignance that had been within it. Once the sphere was gone, it began anew, the wind lashing and howling once again, bearing down upon them faster than ever, as if angered.

“We have to go!” came Edd’s shout through the renewed clamor.

Arya whipped her head around. “I think we--” but her retort died in her throat as she saw what Edd was pointing at.

Animals, rotted and bone-clad, charging from the north, mouths slavering and eyes blue and hungry.

“Fuck!” Clegane yelled from beside her, and they both kicked their horses forward at the same time.

+++ 

*What do I do? Where do I go, now?*

She felt as if her limbs were made of lead, her body as hollow as an old water skin.
She could hold the weight of the world no longer-- she had failed them all, had tucked tail and ran when all seemed lost.

She heard Rhaegal whine to her left, strangely close, just above her shoulder. She opened her eyes, lifted herself up weakly. She could comfort her children, at least, no matter how wretched and useless and unbearably alone she felt now.

She looked at him, hovering mere feet from her side, eyes bleary and burning with tears. “Oh, my son, what have we done?”

Rhaegal looked back at her, and she felt… queer, a lurching low in her belly. There was something… different in those eyes. Something familiar, softer, darker.

“…Jon?” she whispered raggedly. As soon as she said it, she felt mad, but it felt so… right.

Rhaegal let out a huff, another soft, encouraging whine, and banked to the left. Drogon followed.

And that is when she saw it-- a hill crowned by lightning, and she knew not all was lost.

+++ 

He was in the snow. Why was he in the fucking snow?

“JON!” someone was shouting above him, smacking his face, yanking on his hauberk. “JON! What in the seven hells!?”

He blinked the fog from his eyes, coughed, feeling coming back into his limbs slowly, as if he were floating back to earth. Tears were stinging his eyes. “Arya!” he gasped, “Arya! We have to go!”

“Are you fucking kidding me, Jon? Of course we have to go!” Arya shouted in confusion as she hefted him up with some difficulty. “Get the fuck up! Come on!”
“Hurry up, Snow!” The Hound yelled over the rising cacophony. He was holding the reins of Jon’s rearing horse with some difficulty.

His limbs still felt weak, shaky, but he stumbled to his horse, hefted himself up.

“We have company!” Arya called to him, pointing to the north, where a mass of undead were charging.

He wasted no more time, kicking his horse and galloping to the others. He pushed the memory of what had just happened back, far back-- the feeling of power so vast he could scarcely contain it, the wind lifting under his wings, carrying him over the earth. The pulse of electricity under his veins. The sight of her screaming and sobbing on Drogon’s back, heart broken, thinking she had fled, had left everything she had ever loved in a tide of ice and death.

His companions fell in behind him and Arya as they charged for the line of forest, but the dead were fast, were gaining upon them just as swiftly as the storm was.

They rode hard, snow flying and whipping, leaping over logs and stones, the sound of the pursuit of death growing ever louder and louder.

Ahead there came a haunting cry, sending a thrill of recognition through him so strong that he nearly cried out.

From the forest was an answering chorus of life-- hoots and howls and all the manner of forest sounds, and among the dark trees emerged a flash of white.

*Ghost*.

With another howl, Ghost was joined by beasts innumerable, appearing from the loam. Deer and elk and wolf and owl. Every creature Jon had ever known to roam the wilds of the Wolfswood.

They all came flooding out of the trees, their grunts and snorts and growls coalescing into a mighty racket as they charged.
For the first time since he had watched Daenerys swoop over that frozen lake a lifetime ago, he felt a wild blaze of hope and love scorch his heart, tempering it true, steeling it for the fight that lay ahead. He looked to his right, where Arya rode beside him—his precious little sister, returned to him, impossibly, to fight by his side. She wore an expression of sheer wonder, and he knew that the same hope that had taken root in him had flared to life within her.

The horde of creatures rushed past their little cadre, clashing savagely with the force that tailed them. Jon glanced over his shoulder, watching the carnage unfold— all of life answering the call to defeat death once and for all.

Ghost remained where he was, waiting patiently as his master and his company finally crossed into the line of the ancient wood, before turning to join them, silent as a shadow.

Jon did not know if he had ever been so glad to see his strange companion. He wanted nothing more than to halt his horse and jump down, to give Ghost his gratitude, for Jon knew that his wolf had somehow procured this strange army that had proven their saving grace.

He soon found that Ghost was not alone. From the shadowy brush came the rustle of many paws, the yaps and yowls of many mouths. And emerging slowly from the trees, came a company of wolves that had to number in the hundreds, at least. And beside them loped another beast of the same size as ghost, a creature as unmistakable as Jon’s own reflection.

“Nymeria?” Arya gasped from beside him.

The wolf howled in answer, drawing level with her brother, now at the head of the company, leading them westward. Leading them to the final battle ground.

Jon felt his blood sing, the familiar promise of violence lighting within him, and he rode on.

+++  

The air was oddly calm.

She ordered her sons higher, somehow knowing what awaited her atop that hill as they drew ever nearer.
The tower of lightning snapped and jolted, swirled into the sky from within the circle of stones below. She knew, then, that this is where her quarry sheltered, where they conjured the hellish storm that thrashed over Winterfell now.

She was a stranger here, this swathe of empty moors dotted with the tombs of ancient kings. Kings who ruled this realm a millenia ago, long before the shadow of dragons passed over their cold keeps.

The Kings of Winter, they were called.

Some mighty well of magic must have been entombed here, long ago, to grant whoever discovered it the power of winter itself.

She circled as she neared the tower of elemental force that roared up from the very earth itself, and her sons called out, eager to rend and tear, to bathe the Kings of Winter in the fury of their breath. They were undaunted, the power that thrummed through the air only adding to their bloodlust. She could feel the heat of Drogon’s fire beneath her stoking like a forge under a bellows.

She closed her eyes, allowed their hunger and their wrath seep into her, flow through every fiber and vein until she was naught but a weapon. Daenerys Stormborn, the Unburnt.

*Stormbreaker*.

She opened her eyes, the voice she heard so frail she thought it simply the wind. But she could not think on it long, as she felt the cold gaze from far below, the object of her nightmares finding her amid the clouds.

She felt, rather than heard, Drogon’s answering rumble.

She soothed him, entreating patience. She did not know exactly what she was waiting for, only that she must wait.

+++
The air grew heavier and heavier as they rode, the crackle of static buzzing through his bones. The pack-- human and wolf alike-- loped along in silence for an age, it seemed. The sky above, flickering through the bare-boned branches above him, grew clear and cold, the stars burning in the black vault like watchfires.

And then the trees thinned, giving way to a carpet of glowing white, and a hill ringed in ancient stone and wreathed in white-blue hellfire.

Jon pulled up his reins, and his companions followed suit. He took in the sight, impossible and unimaginable. His hands tightened on his reins, the breath coming into his lungs heavy and labored, burdened with the infernal crackle of whatever conjuring lay before him.

He heard the screech of dragons, and his heart leapt. He looked to the sky, where Drogon and Rhaegal circled, biding their time, surveying their battleground.

Ghost answered with a howl, and then the chorus of hundreds rose up around him like the scattering of locusts. He felt his blood run hot, racing to his hands, his legs, readying himself for it.

He could not ask for a better company for this dread task. He took one, last, long breath, allowing the power in the air to abide within him, this time, to sink within his every pore and vessel like a spell.

He dismounted his horse and pushed the poor beast’s head toward the direction from where they came, and gave him a firm slap on his flank. He screamed and bolted, glad to be away. His companions followed suit.

He unlooped his belt, drew it through the buckle, and unsheathed his mighty sword as he threw the scabbard away into the snow. He held it before him to admire the marred fullers, the misty luster, the whorls of blood and soot forever ingrained within it.

The power of the Mother of Dragons, imbued into his very blade, to see him to the end.

He closed his eyes, brought the cold pommel to his brow, wondering if she could feel him reaching out to her, high above him keeping watch. Reaching out to the babe that lived within her womb.
“I love you. Both of you. More than you could know.”

He lowered his sword, watching as his companions drew their own blades, the grim lines creasing each face all too familiar to him-- the faces of those prepared for death.

He rolled his shoulders and marched forward.

+++  

Dany could not help the helpless, joyous sob that escaped her when she saw Jon emerge from the trees below.

She could not see him properly from this vantage, but she knew it was him, come to finish what they must do, together.

She had girded herself with a careful hope after her strange encounter with Rhaegal. Had told herself that her love somehow lived, and would meet her where the power of the gods had been unleashed.

But that did not entirely pluck the bitter thorn of incredulity from her heart as the minutes had crawled by, circling and circling. Only seeing him with her own eyes would finally see it pulled free.

She wanted nothing more than to order Drogon to the ground, to leap from his shoulders and into Jon’s arms and never leave.

The urge to end it all, to root out the Night King from his haven with blood and fire and cast him from the earth forever was potent. She felt it rise within her, and at the call of wolves below, she could resist the spell no longer. She threw herself forward with a shout, her dragon’s blood boiling under her bones.

Her sons answered her with their own war cries, the sounds ringing in her ears like the death knells they were.
She could just barely see the Night King, hidden in the torrent of wind and power, but she could see his lieutenants clearly, circled about him in a protective ring.

She dove along the column of light, feeling the pulse and spark of that elemental power at her back. She watched as Jon and his retinue charged up the hill, and from the cloak of snow and ice sprung the skeletons of long-dead kings-- the founders of her husband’s blood come to end their own line.

+++ 

He had to tear his eyes away as the queen and her dragons dived, skimming the edge of that furious storm.

The great pack that flanked him called out in hunger, and sped past him and his companions, charging for the revenants that had been called from the grave.

He heard the Hound grunt as he sent one into the snow, Jorah taking on another that had managed to dodge through the crush of the wolves. Arya was the only one who kept close to him, but he found that he did not need to lift his sword. The dead fell around him like leaves, caught upon a blade or in the trap of tooth and claw.

He kept his eyes trained squarely upon the swirl of lightning ahead, the ring of demons that hid his quarry at the crest of the hill. He picked up his pace, the wind kicking up as he drew closer. He felt his jaw lock, his lips curl into a snarl as he managed to catch a glimpse of him, standing within his shelter like the craven he was.

He lifted his blade with a roar, and spun, catching the first White Walker in the torso with Longclaw right as the creature swung the other way.

The beast exploded into a thousand shards of ice with a piteous wail, but Jon did not allow himself to revel, even for a moment. The tower of lightning wavered, flickered.

The others came for him, eyes blue and blazing with hatred as he inched his way to the edge of that great tempest. But his companions were there to meet them, dragonglass and Valyrian steel ringing in the air as it clashed with the weapons of the Winter.
With each White Walker that met its end, the mighty torrent before him seemed to weaken, grow more and more unstable. Jon knew not how to enter, how to flush out the demon who lived within.

“Jon!” came a cry and Jon spun about, seeing a White Walker, taller and bulkier than any he had ever seen, march his way towards him, his ancient blade raised high.

Jon lifted his sword just as the blow came down. It rang into his hand and up his arm and he cried out in pain.

The swirl of lightning was growing chaotic, lightning lashing out, leaving scars upon the snow, craters in the earth as it struck out at its attackers.

Jon heaved himself forward, throwing the beast back. It staggered, perhaps a bit stunned, and went for him again.

There was a savage bark and a flurry of white fur and the creature was sent flying into the snow.

Ghost was at the White Walker’s neck, snarling and smeared in blood and soot. Daenerys was bathing the hillside in hellfire as the Night King and his lieutenants called upon more and more dead from the wood beyond. Lightning crackled and snapped around him, brewing up more wind, filling the air with clots of earth. His companions battled for their lives as much as for his all around him. Taking down White Walker after White Walker, the few dead that managed to sneak past the line of fire and wolves.

It was an unearthly hellscape. And he had to end it. They had to end it.

Ghost yelped as his prey found its strength, grabbed the wolf by his neck with both hands and threw him, hard. Ghost went flying, his back hitting one of the massive stones that encircled them.

Jon felt every drop of rage and hatred he had ignite within him like a lake of pitch.

He stepped forward to charge the fucker, but was stopped, as if yanked on a lead. ‘No.’ He felt his blood, thundering hot and hungry in his heart, ground to a halt in his veins.
‘Be a dragon.’

But he did not close his eyes, did not throw his mind to the skies as he had done before.

He watched, helpless, as The Hound and Jorah stepped into the White Walker’s path of destruction. As Jorah dodged just an instant too late and tumbled to the earth.

He blinked against the bite of wind and snow, watched as Daenerys suddenly ordered her sons to the skies. His feet took him closer to the whirl of lightning seemingly of their own accord. He took Longclaw into both his hands and waited.

+++ 

Dany climbed and climbed, the cold biting into her cheeks, making her eyes sting and stream with tears.

Drogon pulled back and hovered, seemingly at the roof of the world, Rhaegal calling out in anticipation.

Stormbreaker.

She looked up, the stars looking on as witness as she dove again, enshrined in her sons’ fire, into the middle of the storm.

The magicked lightning of the Old Gods and the flames of the Lord of Light coalesced, brewed and formed an element all their own around her. Her world was filled with a purplish hue, rushing over her in a torrent of heat and light. Her and her sons plummeted to the earth, their wings tucked into their sides.

At last, she saw him, gazing up at her with a malevolence that would have chilled the blood of the bravest man.

But she was no man. Drogon and Rhaegal both roared and wreathed the Night King in purple flame.
There was a mighty flash, a blast of fiery wind, and all was silent for a time.

+++ 

He watched, the shimmering shadows of dragons swirling through a column of infernal fury, closer and closer, faster and faster.

‘Now!’

Jon thrust his sword into the swirling column, just as Dany and her sons found their mark with a blast of queer, elemental flame.

The world went blank. The light so bright and blazing it stunned him into a stupor, the sound and blast that came with it too much to withstand.

When he could open his eyes again, he was somehow still standing on the hill, blasted clean of snow or stones, devoid of all life--animal or no, and the Night King stood before him, the blade of Longclaw trapped within his icy claws.

His eyes were like stars, cold and unknowable, unreachable, and they regarded him with a depthless hatred.

The Knight King clenched his fist and Longclaw thrummed under Jon’s numb hands, sung out a warning call, and then shattered in a storm of flying steel. The shards ripped into him, betraying the master they served and slicing into his thigh, his cheek, his eye.

Jon cried out in agony, blood welling and pouring from his face, the hilt of his once magnificent sword hanging impotently from his grip.

The Night King struck out before Jon could gather himself, could fully comprehend what had happened, and had a hand around his throat, his claws digging in cruelly. Jon gasped and grappled, but it was useless.
He felt death crawl into his veins, felt it seep through him like poison. He casted his eyes to the skies, hoping to catch one, last glimpse of her before it took him under for good.

+++

Dany jumped from Drogon’s back before he had even properly landed, crashing to the frozen sedge of the hill in a tumble of limbs that jarred her to the roots of her teeth. She gasped, righting herself before stumbling forward, sword raised in her numb fingers, roaring out in a spell of blind, stupid fury.

The sword rang out with a shrill cry as it landed upon The Night King’s own, strange, ice-forged blade. He stared at her with a malevolence as ancient and fundamental as the moon and tides. Jon scrambled weakly at the Night King’s icy wrist, gaping like a trout, a terrible blue seeping from the creature’s claws, inching up his neck. Blood poured from his left eye, drenching his neck, his shoulder.

The Night King shoved hard, throwing her back. She cried out as her shoulder connected with the ground. She sat up, sputtering, eyes swimming. Jon had lost all strength, his arms hanging slack and useless at his sides.

Panic, hopeless, savage panic seized her then and she lunged to her feet, rushing forward while the Night King was still distracted with recruiting his newest, most desired prize.

He turned back to her, raising his lance, but she ducked, rage boiling in her blood, swinging the sword down low, catching the demon’s knee. He buckled, Jon dropping onto the ground with a wail.

The howl of the wind stirred up once more, the Night King’s ire rising with every breath. She wanted to run to Jon, to throw herself upon him until she was sure they would never be cloven from each other again, but the Night King turned his malice onto her like a torch. Drogon screamed above her, mad with worry, but she called him away, well remembering the last time her son had used his flame against the devil before her, what the weapon clutched in his claws could do to her child.

She lifted her sword again, planting her feet. Only her, her limited training, and her needle of a sword standing between Jon and a hellion from another world.
Incensed, the Night King caught her blade within his black claws and clenched. The pommel trembled violently under her palms before exploding asunder within a storm of raining metal. She fell back again, nearly landing on Jon’s limp form within the snow.

She spat and sputtered, mud in her mouth, ash clotting her nose, her eyes swimming as she dared look Jon in the face, fearing the worst.

Jon was looking at her, very much alive. His eyes were black, lit by something she had never seen before. A fire that she yearned to hold. She watched as his fist tightened around something—the broken hilt of his legendary sword.

She understood everything, then. There would be no escape. It was death or victory now, and there was nothing left for it.

And she would not leave him again.

Her vision of him was broken, the feet of their foe stepping between them, bending to pick her up. She felt his icy fingers brush against the column of her neck, hopeless to stop it, her breath freezing in her lungs.

The creature let out a furious wail, Jon lunging the jagged end of Longclaw right into the meat of his thigh from behind. The Night King came to his knees as Jon yelped and rolled away, the demon’s black blood burning into his hand, hissing and melting into the hilt of the sword.

Dany scrambled to her feet, going for the Night King’s lance, to drive it into his heart and watch him scream and die like the mortal man he once was.

But something caught her by her ankle, yanking her back into the mud and ice. She gasped, rolling onto her back, kicking madly as an infernal cold started sleeping into her flesh, invading every nerve and fiber, inching ever higher. But the Night King could not be deterred.

Jon cried out, crawling on his belly to get to the weapon discarded among the snow. The Night King stood, never letting go of her ankle, dragging her through the slush, stepping upon the lance with a booted foot just as Jon had reached it.

Dany tried calling out to Jon, railing and fighting with everything she could find left within her, but
the grip the demon had on her was as good as ice on a window pane. He turned his hellish eyes upon her, watching, unconcerned with Jon writhing in the snow at his feet, trying to free the lance under his boot.

The ice was climbing ever higher, the Night King as patient as a cat waiting for a mouse.

*He doesn’t want to kill us*, she realized through her fear. *He wants to recruit us*.

It was then that something very queer happened.

The creeping, burning frost reached her knee and exploded.

The scar Jon had gifted her leapt into a furious flame, infighting her very core, flames licking into her blood and breath.

The Night King released her, dropping her like a hive of hornets. His hand came away hissing and dripping as good as candle wax. His fury rose as he dived for her, going for her throat.

But he shrieked when he touched her, stumbling back as his hands melted away before him.

Dany felt as though she were flame incarnate, lifting herself to her feet, her clothes burning into ash and swirling in the heat around her. The strappings of her armor melted and broke with a crackle, the chain mail glowing with hellfire, crumbling into dark cinders at her now-bare feet.

The Night King howled and the wind rose and the snow froze into shards as sharp as glass, but they hissed into nothing when they swirled near. Liquid flames dripped from her fingers, danced amongst her white-hot hair.

She stepped forward, frost steaming under her heels like broth. Puddles bubbled and hissed. She lifted her hands, fire wreathed and blinding.

The Night King lunged for his lance, hands now nothing but black, knitted bones, blowing away in the wind. But Jon was there, staggering to his feet and lifting the lance with a cry as the ice burned into the flesh of his palms, and swung.
The Night King was thrown into the dirt. Jon pinned the him there as good as a stuck sow, the lance burning through the demon’s shoulder and into the ground below.

Dany bent over him and drove her fingers into his chest.

Flames leapt from her hands, white and blazing. Steam billowed like a thunderhead. A piercing scream rent through the howl of the wind as the Night King’s infernal flesh melted and spilled away, as his ancient bones caught as though they were naught but tinder. Her fingers found something as slick as glass, as hard as stone within and she pulled with a wrathful roar.

The cry that sounded from the Night King’s gaping jaws nearly deafened her as she watched his form fall away to ash and float into the dying wind.

Then there was silence.

No wind howling or lightning cracking. No death cries of men and beasts. Only the quiet that had fallen upon the world.

She looked to Jon, who was simply staring at her, bloody and bruised and panting, but gods he was here. He was alive.

It was then that it really struck her, that they had both assumed that either one or both of them would not survive this fight. That for both of them to emerge alive after such a battle was simply too much to hope for.

She gave a ragged sob and stumbled forward. She was in his arms within a breath.

“Gods, Dany,” he breathed into her hair.

She couldn’t respond. She didn’t know if she would ever be able to speak again. The only thing she knew was that his arms were warm and real around her, and she clutched the heart of the demon who killed her son in her hands.
first, thank you all so much for your effusive support on the last chapter. it's always hard to come back to a story after a long hiatus, because in most writer's minds, they still care about the story, but that certainly doesn't mean anyone else does.

second, i hope you liked this. this is a chapter that i've been tweaking, perfecting, and agonizing over for nearly a year. it has gone through so many rewrites i can't even count them all. what's hilarious though, is that i ended up scrapping about 80% of this chapter, rewriting the whole thing in a matter of a few days, and only tweaking the end. writing is really fucking weird. i know that maybe there are some things that are confusing, but there are questions that are still to be answered. prepare for a monster chapter next time (lol as if this one isn't a monster).

third, thank you to the Tarts for their continued friendship and love, although i've been spotty at best the past few weeks. huge shout out to hardlyfatal for the much-needed stunt reading (or, the simile patrol, as i like to call her). and thank you so much to justwanderingneverlost for the amazing, beautiful, splendid mood board.

let me know what y'all think, and come say hi on tumblr!
Chapter Summary

“Someone help me!” Daenerys screamed. “Help me with him!”

Jon had gone limp within a few breaths of their tearful embrace, his weight threatening to bring her down. She lowered him to the ground with difficulty, struggling to not drop him like a sack of stones.

“Jon!” she cried, her voice cracking. “No, Jon! Wake up!” Her throat felt blistered, as if she were breathing fire, a true dragon. Her eyes were hot and wet and her vision splintered as she curled her bloodied fingers into the front of his hauberk, slick with blood. “Don’t! Don’t, Jon! We’ve won!”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
The docks were packed, people bustling shoulder to shoulder, shouting and waving to the ships hoisting anchor in the wide bay.
Melisandre looked to the mass of people, her heart feeling queer. She placed her hands upon the gunwale, tapping a finger as she lifted her eyes to the great city beyond. Blue columns of smoke rose lazily into the still air, not the result of mere kitchen fires. Closer, by the piers and jetties, the gate of some great manse belonging to some great merchant still hung splintered and smoldering on its bronze hinges.

She turned her face away from the messy sights of revolution and the scent of burning bodies and melted gold. Upon the endless line of ocean at her back were ships innumerable, hoving their way south, then further east, past the ruins of Valyria and beyond-- to the blood-soaked shores of Slaver’s Bay.

She brought two fingertips to the jewel at her throat, taking some small comfort in the warmth that resided there. She closed her eyes, remembering her Sister’s parting words with her with some strange dread.

“This is where we must part forever, my Sister,” Kinvarahad said to her warmly, hands running up and down the length of her arms. “We have done mighty things here, but I and the Fiery Hand cannot accompany you on this quest. Look to the light, Melisandre.”

“For the night is dark and full of terrors,” she whispered to herself, now, as the sun melted into the sea.

Kinvara had given no reason for her abandonment, though Melisandre was smart enough to divine the purpose easily enough: with the masters overturned, Volantis was ripe for the plucking-- for the Lord of Light and others besides.

She swallowed, her eyes turning westward. “You are doomed to die in that strange country, Sister,” the High Priestess had told her on the eve of battle, a week ago, now. “How and why I cannot say. The Lord of Light hides his will from me once again.”

Doubt clawed at her heart, as she watched the trail of ships fade into the horizon. She knew the feeling well… it was the very same doubt she had that fateful night in the far flung North. After she had looked her king and champion in the face and told him that a great sacrifice must be made- - the ultimate price paid to clear the snows and claim victory.

She had once dismissed her doubt as lack of faith, a human flaw in her servitude to her god.
She would not do so again.

She set her jaw, and turned on her heel, making for her cabin and her brazier. She waved to a cabin boy, never slowing on her path. He was no older than nine, a teardrop tattooed upon his cheek as he trotted beside her.

“Ensure that I am not disturbed,” she told him as they approached her cabin door. “I must commune with the fire tonight.”

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“There! Up ahead!”

Pod’s voice cracked through Sansa’s haze of panic. She and Davos were panting, sweat beaded on their brows despite the cold. They held Gilly up between them, who had twisted her ankle in the brush of the Wolfswood in their retreat. Missandei trotted in front of them, a wailing Little Sam bouncing upon her hip.

Through the bare trees, Sansa could just make out the silver flash of the White Knife. She looked to her right, where Tyrion had hovered for the duration of their flight from Winterfell, and he shared a hopeful but furtive look.

The wind howled and groaned through the trees, branches snapping and trunks bowing under the might of the approaching storm.

“What of a boat?” Varys puffed, his fine robes a tattered mess.

Through the chaos, Sansa could hear shouts up ahead. Shouts of panic and grief. Her people, left upon the wrong shore of the river with no boat to ferry them across.

She came skittering to a stop on the frosty banks, the icy air knifing in her overworked lungs. Her eyes frantically scanned the line of the river, where dozens and dozens of people—men, women and wailing babes, clutched at each other and cried into the rising tumult of the storm, dazed and groping blindly, nowhere left to run. A contingent of Unsullied stood with them, stolid and
unmoving as ever, but tense, their utility run out.

Her heart thudded so painfully in her chest she cried out, watching the fear in the faces of her people turn to frail hope upon seeing her. “Lady Stark!” they called to her, rushing forward as if she could shelter them from the calamity falling in around them.

Lady Stark, she thought numbly to herself, Lady Stark is dead, I am only Sansa.

The wind picked up, the cold rising, and she could tarry no longer. “Pod!” she screamed over the gale. The man came blundering forward, his feet numb and leaden, no doubt, clothes in shreds and face red with the scrape of bramble and branch as he had blazed their trail through the wild thicket of the Wolfswood. “Take hold of Gilly for me.”

The man nodded, ducking under the woman’s arm as Sansa freed herself. “We will find a path over the river!” she called to the considerable crowd of people who had gathered about her like moths to a flame. “Do not despair!”

Some faces turned heartened, others remained stony. Sansa could not well blame them. Even as she turned to walk up the bank, the storm bore ever onward, nearly upon their heads now and deafening in her ears. She was somewhat glad of it. This way she could not hear the footfalls of nearly a hundred people behind her. People who were under her protection.

Tyrion walked with her, silent, for once. His quiet, steady presence at her side proved a boon, though it was unasked for. She kept her eyes to her right as she hiked northward, vigilant and vaguely hopeful, even as she could hear the groan and crack of ice, the frothing White Knife freezing under the abominable winter.

For many, a frozen river would be ideal for their current predicament, but Sansa knew better than to trust the magicked weather. A frozen river also meant frozen bodies within moments.

“ There!” she finally gasped, pointing to the old, tumbledown mill she hadn’t been sure was there, it had been so long since she had journeyed here. It lay upon a small rise in the river, a favorite adventuring spot for her and the other ladies of Winterfell when they were naught but children. The causeway arching across the breadth of it was so old that the top stones of the wall had washed away, but the water was shallow enough to cross safely… with care and time they did not have, but it was the best route to refuge they had.
With a few shouted commands, people started making their way across, much too slowly.

Fear ate a hole in her belly as she watched a mother and babe totter her way over the slick stones, ankle-deep in the freezing, swift river. As Gendry ferried Missandei and Little Sam and a hobbled Gilly over the slick stones.

“They need to go faster,” Sansa muttered more to herself than anything, her teeth chattering loudly.

She shared a look with Tyrion. His eyes were slanted in worry as he looked away, striding toward the Unsullied captain who was leading the much too slow fording of the river. There was much hand waving and some cursing from her companion, his Valyrian obviously poor. Varys seemed to pick up on what Tyrion wished to convey and stepped in, translating more fluently than that of his companion, and finally the Unsullied captain nodded and gestured to the rest of his men.

Sansa watched as a chain of Unsullied unfolded into the river, as seamless and steady as a boom chain, shields held at their chests and spears dug into the river. “Now, you lot, who wants to live?” Tyrion shouted over the milling crowd after the Unsullied had unfurled. Seventeen brave men in total, standing ankle to knee-deep in the rush of the freezing river, acting as a continuous, steadying wall.

There was some amount of chaos and bustle, but eventually a line was formed and people were making it across much more swiftly, using the Unsullied-- spear, shield, arm, or shoulder-- as something as a railing to make their crossing easier.

Sansa allowed herself the smallest breath of relief as she caught eyes with Tyrion. He smiled sadly at her and she returned the expression, feeling much the same-- heartened yet despaired. What would they do after they crossed the river with no horse or boat to carry them to refuge? If the dead did not find them first, the storm would eventually claim them without the aid of swifter transport. And what if the dead did find them first? What would they do if their one sure barrier against the dead— the flow of the White Knife— froze under the storm’s mighty sway and they made their way across as easy as stepping over a stone?

The questions faded from her mind as she turned to her right, her heart in her mouth.

A distant, haunting call. A beast not quite of this world.

She stood stockstill, facing the dark line of the forest, watching as the trees bowed and the
branches whipped and snapped, waiting and waiting.

From the loam came another call, then another, sounds unearthly and wild through the roar of wind. Snarls and growls and the snapping of teeth. The clack of bone on bone and the moan of misery. The stamp and slash of hoof and claw through stem and branch.

“Go!” she bellowed, “Go! Run!”

The chorus of encroaching death and the howl of the wind was shot through with the shrill cries panic from the refugees, the loud slosh and splash of those already in the river hastening their pace.

“My lady! Come!” Pod called to her, sliding down the slushy slope to where she stood. Gendry followed in his wake as Tyrion came forward and grabbed her hand, tugging her onwards with a strength she did not know he possessed.

She went, though she slowed at the tail end of the line, ushering the stragglers forwards with encouraging hands and words. Pod, Gendry and Tyrion fell in behind her, ensuring the last of them found themselves across the water.

The Unsullied fell away as the people crossed safely by them, returning to the bank that they were trying to escape.

“No!” she screamed as she finally made her way into the water. It was as cold as death, seeping the life from her as good as venom. “No! Turn back!”

“Protect the retreat,” one of the men called back to her, eyes hard as flint. “Go, now, Lady Stark.”

She felt her stomach bottom out. What would they do without them? With little to no protection for leagues and leagues to White Harbor? And who were these men, besides? Who were these men she barely knew to sacrifice themselves for people who were not their own?

“We can’t--”

“Let them go,” Tyrion admonished, cutting her off as he tugged at her elbow, gasping, his own
breath stolen by the chill of the river. “They will not retreat.”

“I’ll stay with them, Lady Stark,” Pod told her between chattering teeth. “I will lead any survivors to the other side.”

“Pod, you can’t--” but before she could protest further, the bank she had just stepped from burst with a tide of ghastly animals-- deer and elk and shadowcats alike, snarling and snapping and blue-eyed with an other worldly rage.

With one last glance back to her, Pod crashed forward through the water, now turning to slush around their ankles as the storm threatened just behind the host of undead.

Sansa watched him go, helpless, until Gendry and Tyrion both were yanking her by the elbows, forcing her through the ever thickening water and to the safety of the bank beyond.

She went, legs not really her own any longer, her body feeling odd and numb when she finally stepped onto the shore beyond. She looked back, just once, only making out a blur of black shields and writhing, furred bodies, before she was shunted onwards by her companions.

“They will die in glory, my lady,” Tyrion provided sadly, gently, as they trotted southward. “They will never be--”

“The river,” she interrupted him, as she slowed to a stop. What was once a thin slush was rapidly thickening, the flow slowing. Tendrils of frost reached from the cold bank into the current, floes of ice turning from a trickle to a torrent before her very eyes.

She watched, horrified and helpless, as the line of Unsullied broke, as the creatures of death stamped and reared upon the opposite shore, the scent of life sending them into a frenzy as they awaited the freezing of the river.

A command to flee with all haste was just bubbling in her throat before it withered away into nothing when she heard it.

The grisly clack of bone on bone, the cries of winged revenants, bearing down upon them with unnatural speed.
“Take cover!” she heard Gendry manage to shout before she was ducking, her arms covering her head and neck as best as she could manage.

The putrid flock descended upon them, their awful din overtaking the roar of the storm. They slashed and pulled at her hair, plucked at her cloak, her gloves, anything they could reach.

All around her, she could hear the wails of her people as they were assaulted, helpless and hopeless, their frail victory of crossing the river turning to ash in their mouths.

Sansa dared peer between her arms, where she could just make out the causeway they had just crossed-- their one salvation now the instrument of their unmaking. The river had almost come to a complete freeze in the shallows, and the animals were now picking their way across, blue eyes rolling in hunger, mouths frothing with madness.

She clutched her arms tighter over her head, her gloves ripping open under the slash of beaks, knuckles scraped raw. She slammed her eyes shut, not able to feel the tears on her cheeks, as she dictated one last prayer-- not to the Seven, who knew nothing of this strife. She spoke to the gods of her father, now. They had never listened before, but surely, they would listen now.

A mighty clamor of life answered her desperate plea, and she hardly believed it. It was unmistakable-- altogether different than the chorus echoing on the opposite shore.

Snarls and grunts. The roar of stags and the growls of bears, the howl of wolves.

Her people broke into a wild flight, screaming and fleeing down the bank even as Sansa stood, a strange bloom of elation filling her heart. “Don’t!” she yelled, though it was useless.

Beasts innumerable flooded from the trees, a rush of wild crashing into the icy river and to the shore beyond. Owls and hawks and ravens and sparrows alike clashed with their frail revenants.

Free of their tormentors, she dared not tarry to see the astounding tide of life meet the host of death. She rushed forward, shouting encouragement and hope to her people as she did. She paused to help the old and weak to their feet, to comfort a wailing mother. “We are saved, but perhaps not for long. Come! We have to keep going!”
More quickly than she could have ever have hoped, her people were rising to their feet and falling in behind her, trotting swiftly down the line of ever thickening river.

The sound of death never left them. The flock of birds determined, harrying the rear even as the strength of life followed them. Tawny owls and fierce-eyed hawks catching them by the wing and tossing them into the icy river.

They marched along like that, for seemingly hours, though time seemed to have crawled to a stop. As they walked the din of battle faded, but the threat of it hung over all like a storm cloud. Her legs felt made of custard, her feet painfully cold, knifing with every step, her cloak a leaden weight on her shoulders.

But still, she urged her people onward, to what end she could not know, only certain that to stop would mean certain death.

She thought dimly of Arya, of Jon. Were they dead already? Or were they wounded somewhere, no hope of help ever finding them? And what of the dragons and their mother? Surely they were still forging ahead, looking to claim victory.

But the thought felt as naïve as the tales of knights and ladies and glorious battles she had once admired, when she was just an empty headed girl with no knowledge of the world. No, the storm was upon them now and they could barely move, every step hard won. Even a dragon could not withstand such a calamity.

She looked around her, through the haze of ice and snow, nothing but wind in her ears, her nose, her lungs. Some of her party were trying their damndest to push their way forward, but many and more had sat themselves behind the groaning trunk of a tree, or else had nestled themselves beside a rock, able to stand the onslaught no longer.

She could not find it in her heart to gather the words, to urge them onwards. Hopelessness leaked in and closed its icy grip over her when she heard the awful sound of the dead upon the wing, escapees of their rescuers and unaffected by the magicked storm.

She turned, her hands empty and frozen, no weapon to wield to stave the inevitable, but she could meet it head on, at the very least. She closed her eyes.

There was a blast of warm wind that sent her and her people reeling. She threw her arm over her
eyes, her heart clamoring for purchase.

At the sound of rain she dared opened her eyes.

The sound did not come from water, but rather from bodies-- a macabre deluge of rotted birds fell from the sky and met their grisly ends upon the frozen earth. Her people cried out in fear and confusion, clutching each other for shelter and comfort.

And then silence. No howl of death nor scream of storm. Only the silence.

Sansa quelled her heart, threatening to leap into her mouth from sheer hope and joy. She would not rejoice just yet.

“Come on,” she breathed to her companions as a whisper of rain, true, healing rain, bloomed over the wild wood, “we have to get out of here.”

+++  

The wind nearly flattened him.

It froze the tears on Sam’s cheeks, sliced into the core of him good as a well wielded blade. He blinked against the lashing snow, his vision blurred and bleary in the tumult. He was long past shivering, now, as he stood before the wrought iron gates of the Godswood, the weight of Heartsbane unfamiliar in his hands.

He heard them before he saw them-- snarling and grunting in a gruesome hunger, bone clacking and scraping on bone, where no flesh remained. Some, though, sounded more human than any he had ever heard before-- freshly made revenants from Winterfell’s own stock.

He swallowed back his bile and lifted his sword.

The crash of them against the gate was sickening, clashing into the metal with a wet ‘squelch’ or
else a solid ‘thwack’. The blue orbs of their eyes swarmed about like firebugs while gnarled, knitted hands reached out to snatch up his vital body.

He squared his stance as the gate bowed, groaning against the onslaught. The wind rose and rose and the cold seeped into his very marrow, until he did not know if it would be shaken free should he see the dawn.

He heard the first ‘pop’ of metal like a death knell, the iron of the gate becoming brittle in the icy wind, falling to the pressure of the tide of dead. One foot soldier shoved his way in through a narrow crack and came at him, mouth agape and rasping in madness. Sam swung with some difficulty, his arms nearly numb in the gale.

The beast shrieked and fell in a heap at his feet, but Sam did not have much time to revel in his victory.

One more snaked its way through, then three, then four. Sam hacked and swung, yelling and shouting with the effort. The sword was a weight he was unused to, and he was cold to his bones, besides.

He was already exhausted, having taken down only a dozen. His breath felt like fire in his lungs, his sweat freezing painfully on his brow. He felt faint, looking upon the bowing gates of the Godswood as a half a dozen or more foot soldiers slithered their way through, axes or pikes or rusted swords hefted high, the exhilaration of death driving them ever onward.

His sword clashed hard with the axe of a foe, the impact vibrating violently through his arms until it rattled his teeth. They struggled, the edge of the creature’s weapon caught on Sam’s blade, metal on metal screeching and sparking. In the pause, Sam saw three, four, a dozen more assailants sneak past him. He shoved hard with a yell, sending his attacker sprawling into the snow.

He stumbled to catch up with the enemies that had escaped him, making their way straight for the heart tree. The undead were not so affected by the wind and snow, sprinting straight and true into the Godswood, gaining more ground than Sam could ever hope to recover.

He tripped, his foot catching on an unseen root, and fell hard onto the frozen ground, all the air knocked from him. He gasped, sputtering and spitting snow and dirt from his mouth. He rolled over, only to see the flash of an axe coming down upon him.
He swung his sword blindly, endlessly grateful that he had not lost it in his fall. This time, it sliced through the half-rotten haft of the axe like butter. His enemy wailed in rage and went for him with the broken handle, but Sam was too quick, thrusting Heartsbane through his chest.

He threw the lifeless skeleton aside, struggling to his feet, his vision still swimmy. He saw the heart tree, some ways off, and started again, feet like lead, arms numb.

Bran sat under the tree, unmoving and unknowing of the havoc erupting around him. The tree’s ghostly limbs whipped and snapped in the wild gale, leaves swirling in a blur of red around him. A torrent of magic that it seemed the dead could not pass through.

For around Bran a ring of corpses had formed, standing ready, awaiting a call from some far off demon, or something else… Sam could not begin to say.

Sam took a great, shuddering breath, hefting his sword, readying himself for one last, foolhardy charge.

Then there was a great roar of thunder that stole his breath, and bolt came down-- blue and blinding, and struck the great tree.

Sam looked on in horror and rapture as the mighty, ancient tree of the Gods of the North seemed to absorb the malignant might of winter. Pin lights of storm traced themselves through the white bark, grew and grew in brilliance until the light was too terrible to look upon. And then with a ‘crack’ that seemed to come from the heavens rather than the earth, the tree was cloven in two, the great white trunk falling away into blackened splinters with a whine of broken timber that was as good as a death throe.

Sam had to brace himself, throw his arm over his eyes as a pulse of heat and magic swelled over him, almost knocking him back into the ground. He lowered his arm after a moment, and stood stricken and aggrieved, watching as something so sacred and hallowed and precious was torn asunder by a power so perverted and vile.

He snarled, raising his sword to fight off the demons that had hemmed in his friend as best he could before he fell under storm and steel, only to find that they were dead. Fully, truly dead.

The ring of revenants lay rumpled in the snow, unmoving and silent.
Sam looked around, his heart in his throat, hardly able to believe it.

All about him, the Godswood of Winterfell lay littered with the dark bodies of the dead, laid to rest forevermore.

He lifted his face to the sky, and did not tremble, this time, at the roll of thunder. He closed his eyes as the first drops of rain struck his brow like a cooling balm.

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Jaime had ridden to the front, to call the retreat, to attempt to get these men—strange, foreign men who fought for a country not their own—to some semblance of safety.

But, even in the short time it took him to get to the palisades and the front lines, the world had been thrown into chaos, and the fog of battle took him from there. He could recall nothing more than the heat of fire, the stench of death, and the slash of his sword.

He had finally drawn some of Daenerys’ forces away, but most were either dead already or else unwilling, retreat worse than death. But, upon seeing their fellow soldiers fall and then rise again to join the fold of their enemy, they had finally turned back.

And now, he stood limply among ash and earth, attempting to take in the ruination around him.

After the pulse of strange wind had almost knocked him and his party from their feet, after the sky had cleared and silence had settled its heavy weight upon the world, they had slowed in their dash to the forest and turned back. Had turned back to watch the burning palisades crumble in a billow of inky smoke, to take in the eerie glow of Winterfell on fire against the deepening sky.

Had turned back to hear the cries of hundreds, perhaps thousands, slowly bleed through the quiet like the awakening of crickets.

One of the Unsullied—the captain who had finally ordered his soldiers into retreat, staggered to the fore. Jaime watched as the man, Grey Worm he believed his name was, took his helmet from his head and cast it down in defeat and roared. Raw and wrecked. Animal-like. And he sunk to his
knees, his hunched and heaving shoulders wreathed in distant flame.

Jaime could not help his tears, even after the first tin-can strikes of rain upon his armor.

+++ 

Arya groaned, the world fading in and out around her in a washed out blur. The black bark of trees fell in on her like the walls of a cage as her vision swam, cleared, making her feel cloistered and claustrophobic.

Her head was pounding and her right arm throbbed and burned. She spat out a mouthful of earth, heaving and gasping, her lungs feeling singed. She turned to her left side with a cry, hefting herself up on her good arm. She looked around her, dazed. The world was silent, still. What had happened? What was she doing here?

After what felt like an age, wherein she sat unmoving among the scrub, she heard the plaintive call of a wolf, some distance off. She felt her heart rachet up within her chest, her breath quickening. “Nymeria?” she rasped.

Then, a mighty screech pierced the sky in answer-- the sound unmistakable. The roar of a dragon. Memory came rushing back in, quick as a storm gale. Jon, her companions, the Night King!

She felt panic take hold and struggled mightily to her feet. She strived to remember what had happened— a terrible melee, Tormund roaring out to her to stay away from the ring of stones at the crest of the hill, the Hound falling under the blow from a White Walker. The swirl of dragonfire, the cry of wolves, her brother’s name burning in her throat.

“Jon!” she called through the quiet, her voice barely above a whisper. Everything around her lay eerily still, as if death had finally closed its grip upon the world.

She groped for Needle, but it was not at her hip, and neither was the dragonbone knife. She felt naked, shucked of every last protection. The last living human upon the earth, with no blade to forge her path.
She felt dizzy, her breath not fully gathering in her lungs. She fell to her knees in the slush, her hands splashing into a puddle, wetting her to the elbow.

The sting of cold water brought everything into striking clarity. She lifted her bloodied knuckles, studying the silt and sludge upon her palms. She looked around her, up at the bare-boned trees, once girded with white. A cool, but not cold, drop of water hit her square on the forehead. Her hearing cleared, sharpened.

It was raining. By the gods...

Then another sound joined the chorus of a dying winter. A great crashing through the woods. “Arya!” a voice boomed. “Arya!”

“Arya!” she managed, voice rough and much too quiet, her throat still dry and sticking. She stood up, waving her arms. “Here!” she tried again, clearer and stronger.

A tall figure crashed through the brush, the banner of red hair unmistakable. Tormund Giantsbane found her, looking immensely relieved. “By the bloody gods, lass, It’s good to--”

“Jon?” she choked out as she stumbled toward him, ash and earth still clotting her throat. “Is he--”

Tormund shook his head, tears standing in his one good eye as he walked closer, placing one huge hand upon her shoulder. For one, mortifying instant, Arya believed the worst. “I should have never made fun of his pecker,” he said thickly as his blue eyes roved over her, checking the severity of her wounds. “The man really is a god. Him and the queen both.”

Arya thought she may collapse into the puddle again, the surge of relief and sheer joy was so potent. She slammed her eyes shut, tears hot and stinging.

“We have to get you out of here, lass. Your brother is wounded something fierce, and the Dragon Queen is almost bloody mad with worry. Can you walk?”

She nodded, steeling her nerves and wiping rain from her eyes. It was really picking up, now. “Aye, let’s get the hells out of here.”
“Someone help me!” Daenerys screamed. “Help me with him!”

Jon had gone limp within a few breaths of their tearful embrace, his weight threatening to bring her down. She lowered him to the ground with difficulty, struggling to not drop him like a sack of stones.

“Jon!” she cried, her voice cracking. “No, Jon! Wake up!” Her throat felt blistered, as if she were breathing fire, a true dragon. Her eyes were hot and wet and her vision splintered as she curled her bloodied fingers into the front of his hauberk, slick with blood. “Don’t! Don’t, Jon! We’ve won!”

“HELP ME!” she bellowed to the empty moors, voice a rockslide, throat clotted with tears. Her chest heaved, her lungs burned. She did not care one single damn that she was stark naked, knelt amongst the steaming earth as the heavens opened up above her, washing the blood and burn of war away. All she could see, all she could care about was Jon, lifeless and silent among the muck and mire, blood pouring from his eye and down his neck.

Drogon cried from above, breaking the deafening silence. Rhaegal answered, mournful and worried, and both her beloved sons came to a rumbling landing beside her, thorny heads bent close.

She wanted to cry with joy, her sons’ presence banishing at least some of her panic.

Rhaegal came closer, sniffing at Jon, whining and growling with both anger and despair. Dany brought a palm to her son’s cheek, her heart heavy with what she had just now come to understand. “You have found a rider, sweetling?”

Rhaegal blinked, golden eyes aglow with something Dany had never seen in them before. Her heart felt as heavy as a millstone within her, but she had to let Jon go. She could not lift him upon Drogon’s back without help, and she had to stay, besides. Save for a few scrapes, burns and bruises, she was unharmed, and as such the best chance for any survivors of the battle upon the hill. She could ferry a dozen and more from danger with Drogon. But that would take time. Time that Jon did not have.

She leaned forward, clutched one of Rhaegal’s spikes in her blood-soaked hand. “Take him for me,
my son. Your rider is in trouble and needs to be delivered to White Harbor as fast as you can carry him.”

Rhaegal huffed and stepped forward. Reluctantly, Dany shifted away. Her son wrapped his lethal claws around Jon’s prone form as gentle as if he cradled a babe. He spread his wings with a cry and with several mighty flaps to gain thrust, her son was in the air and flying away to the east.

She watched the black form of her son meld into the darkness of the sky and gathering clouds, the rain washing down her face, spreading soot and blood into her eyes. She finally slammed them shut, the sting too much to bear, the cold starting to seep in without Jon’s heat to hold her to the earth.

“Your Grace!” She heard the call, but only superficially, her mind not really her own, floating somewhere just above her. She looked to her battered and bruised hands, where they were still clutching the blackened heart of a demon.

“Your Grace!” she heard again, closer now, as if the owner of the voice was knelt before her. “Are you hurt?”

She bridled Drogon with their shared mental tether, still curled around her in a protective embrace and rankling at the approach of a relative stranger. She could hear the heat of his scales steaming and hissing in the cooling rain. She bit her lip, tasting the coppery tang of blood and the sweet taste of the heavens. She opened her eyes, let the trophy of her triumph fall between her knees and into the newly made mud. It was nothing more than a rock.

“No,” she finally, looking up. The worried face of Brienne of Tarth gazed back at her, bloodied and streaked with soot, just the same as she. “Come, Lady Brienne, we have work to do.”

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Was his head in a vise?

He couldn’t think of any other explanation for the immense pain and pressure as he slowly, slowly faded back into consciousness.
And gods his throat. It was if he had drank down a goblet of acid. He sorely regretted his moan of pain.

“Jon?” came a vaguely familiar voice, somewhere ahead of him. He struggled to open his eyes, but even the dim light of the fire and the lone taper was too much, and he closed them immediately. There was something decidedly… queer as he did so. He could not begin to place what it was.

He heard someone shift and walk toward his bed. Was it Daenerys?

_Gods, Daenerys!_

“Arya, it’s Jon!” the voice exclaimed happily. “He’s awake!”

“Dany—“ he attempted, but with little luck. It came out no more than a whisper and hurt like all of the seven hells, besides.

He felt cool fingers on his clammy forehead. He suddenly became aware of how hot he was. “Shh, Jon, you’re not supposed to talk.”

Recognition finally fired in his overtaxed brain. “Sansa…”

“What the seven hells did she just say?” At the other, unmistakable voice Jon could not help but peel his eyes open. Or one, at any rate. The sight of his little sister, arm in a sling and a length of linen wrapped about her head, alive and relatively unharmed, was worth all the agony he earned for the effort. She was shaking her head at him, chiding.

“You’re one to talk,” Sansa retorted as she poked and prodded at him. Gently, to her credit, but he really wished she wouldn’t. “You’re supposed to be abed for another day, but instead you’re here skulking about.”

“I do not skulk, I’m keeping watch.”

“What are you watching for?” Sansa said crossly. Jon couldn’t help but smile, their idle chatter
calming, though he wished they’d stop at least a minute. He was desperate to know what had happened. The last he remembered was warmth and light, Daenerys sobbing in his arms before all had gone black.

He heard Sansa drag a stool or chair to his bedside. “Do you really think anyone is going to try to kill our brother when he has a dragon perched outside?”

“Can’t be too careful.”

Jon couldn’t take it anymore. “Daenerys…”

He heard Sansa sigh, very put out. “I’m going to try to tell you everything I know, Jon. First, Daenerys is fine. She sends her love, but she has a lot to do as I’m sure you know. Arya will find her after we all explain some things, alright?” Jon felt his heart warm at that, his emotions steady a bit. His fierce, selfless wife, working and toiling to ensure the safety and comfort of their people... though gods know she had earned her rest.

“Try not to ask any questions,” Sansa went on seriously. “The maester says that your throat is burned from the Night King’s grip on your neck. It’ll take some time to heal, but it’ll take longer if you try to talk, understand?”

He nodded, cracking his eyes— or one fucking eye— open. He lost all patience at that. He pointed to his left eye, hoping his sister understood.

Her face fell and she bit her lip. “You’ve lost the eye, Jon,” she told him, her voice tender. Jon froze under the weight of this news, not quite believing it, woefully underprepared to handle such an enormous alteration to his own body. An eye? “The maester says that you were lucky to survive. If the dragon hadn’t delivered you here as swiftly as he did, you would have bled out.” The dragon? Jon thought to himself. His head was starting to swim again and he shut his eye to try to gather himself. “But… there was nothing to be done. He had to take the eye,” Sansa finished solemnly.

“Tormund is positively elated,” Arya cut in, glib. He could feel her weight settle itself on the edge of the bed. “He says that you’ll match now.”

Jon couldn’t help his snort, but again, immediately regretted it as he sputtered and started to cough.
Before he fully knew what was happening, Sansa had him sitting up in bed, feeding him a beaker of pale, bitter liquid. It tasted vile but felt exquisite on his throat.

“Willow and goat’s milk,” she provided after he had settled. Gods he hated this. Being helpless and frail, burdening his family. Especially Sansa… she must have a hundred other things she should be doing besides nursing him like a sick babe. “And a bit of milk of the poppy, just for good measure. You’ll be falling asleep on us soon.”

He sighed, not denying that. His coughing had already wrung the last of his energy out. He was sure that a dose of Milk of the Poppy would knock him out cold.

“You also have burns on your hands,” Sansa continued without preamble. “But, otherwise you’re unharmed.”

“Alive,” Arya interjected and he felt her squeeze his hand.

“And something of a god,” Sansa quipped dryly. “You and your dragon scared the living hells out of every last person in White Harbor.” What in the hells was she talking about? He couldn’t ride a bloody dragon. “The green one… what’s his name… Rhaegar?”

“Rhaegal,” Arya corrected for him.

“Rhaegal. Well, he landed one-legged on the battlements and made a mighty racket until someone noticed he had a body in his claws. He finally placed you down and has been lurking on various walls of White Harbor ever since.”

Jon couldn’t understand it, but he was much too tired to try to wrangle with it now. He waved his hand, bidding his sister to continue. He didn’t have much time left in the waking world, he could tell.

“Daenerys arrived almost a day later upon her dragon, bearing at least 20 people with her on his back. Then she left again, to oversee the transport of the wounded and refugees… including me and the others.”

His pride was almost painful. Gods, he missed her so fiercely in that moment he clenched his fists.
“The dead are many. We will have to erect many pyres,” Sansa told him softly. “But we have won, and all know who to thank.”

He felt his heart clench at that. He turned his head toward his sister, fearing the answer but needing to know all the same. Grief was a long, arduous process, best start now. “Who… the dead?”

“Don’t bloody talk!” Arya admonished.

Sansa looked down at her hands. “The total has not yet been counted. Suffice it to say… that the loss is mighty indeed.” She took in a great breath, steadying herself for what came next. “Podrick Payne,” she began shakily. “Ser Jorah Mormont.” Jon looked away at that, eyes stinging. Daenerys… she must have cried herself hoarse and he could not be there to comfort her. “Beric Dondarrion,” she went on, “Bronn of the Blackwater. Lord Royce of the Vale… and— oh, Jon.”

He felt his heart simply stop, tears already threatening. He glanced at both his sisters. Arya sat at his right, stony and silent but her mouth downturned. Sansa, at his other side, took in a shaky breath and shook her head. “I’m sorry, Jon, but Ghost…”

The pain knifing in his chest at her speaking the words he had dreaded was almost equal to the splitting pain in his head. He turned away from her, a sadness so potent swamping him in that moment he felt as if he were drowning.

“He’s heard enough,” he heard Arya say quietly to Sansa.

There was a small silence in which he dared not open his eyes.

“Rest well, brother,” came Sansa’s voice from further away than it was before. “And… I’m so sorry.” And then there was a soft ‘click’ of a door closing and he was left with silence and darkness once again.

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It was a wonder she was still on her feet.

As soon as the door to her borrowed chamber clicked closed, she felt as if she could simply lean against the wall and fall asleep for an age.

“You need to rest, Your Grace,” Tyrion encouraged gently, even as he handed her a cup of wine and settled himself at the table beside Varys. There were maps and letters of all assortments piled upon it, and two empty chairs surrounding it. One for her, and…

She sighed mightily, biting her lip before taking a bracing quaff of her drink and taking one of the empty seats.

“Oh, obviously,” Varys began lightly, a newly mended cut glistening over his right eyebrow. “We do not have to address all of these tonight, Your Grace. We both know how tirelessly you’ve been working, and you above all need rest.”

And Jon, she thought sadly to herself, glancing quickly at the empty chair next to her. She nodded her agreement, the allure of sleep too great to ignore.

“The Manderlys have employed all available barges and river ships up the White Knife, to ferry the injured and stranded to White Harbor for treatment and shelter,” Tyrion piped up, tracing his finger up the White Knife and tapping upon Winterfell. “It should be enough, due to your efforts, Your Grace.”

“And the pyres?” Dany asked, her throat tight.

“All able bodied volunteers are at work on them as we speak, Your Grace,” Varys assured with a nod. “We estimate that work should be complete on them within the week.”

She nodded. “Good.”

“The Lord Manderly has proposed a feast, Your Grace, after the funeral. To celebrate the lives lost, the victory of the Dragon Queen and the King of the North, and the end of winter,” Varys went on tightly, knowing how loath she was to participate in such things.
She inwardly prickled. Each day passed was another day lost for her people kidnapped on Dragonstone.

Tyrion sensed her unease. “I think it prudent to accept this offer, my queen,” he told her with a frown. “Your people have suffered greatly and have little and less to rejoice about lately. It could prove--”

“I know,” she snapped, her exhaustion getting the better of her. “I know all that Tyrion. I only hesitate because every hour we tarry here is an hour where Cersei Lannister sits the Iron Throne and lays her clever traps. Where my people are on Dragonstone in the clutches of a madman.”

Tyrion looked grim, nodding in a tacit agreement that told her all she needed to know: yes, I know, my queen but we really have no choice.

She blew a defeated breath through her teeth, willing herself to calm. “What else of note?”

Varys exchanged a look with Tyrion, who shook his head. “We can speak of it later, Your Grace--”

“What is it?” She was having none of their games.

Tyrion shifted in his chair, uncomfortable. “Well, Your Grace, the imaginations of men cannot be… underestimated, and the tales and songs of your and the king’s heroics have already begun their weaving.” He looked at Varys again and Dany could only feel annoyed, feeling as though her two advisors were coddling her. “Tormund Giantsbane, for one, is persistent in one fact that he observed on that hilltop before… well before you were wrapped in Lady Brienne’s cloak.”

Dany felt her blood run cold, anger knifing through her. “I never knew him to be a beast.”

Tyrion shook his head. “No, Your Grace, it is nothing of… the salacious nature.”

Dany looked between her two advisors, at a complete loss. “Then what is it that Tormund Giantsbane is supposed to have seen?”

Varys leaned forward, his face worried, gentle. “Well, Your Grace, to put it in his own words, he claims to have seen ‘a bump where a babe is grown’.”
There was a small, tense silence, wherein Dany didn’t know whether to laugh at such a ridiculous phrasing, or find Tormund right that moment and box him about the ears for his loose tongue.

“The people have gone a bit mad with it, Your Grace,” Tyrion went on, “and it is quite a tale-- the queen who slew death itself with child... a child with the blood of winter and the fire of old Valyria, no less. It is a grand yarn, but, seeing as though--”

“It’s true, my lord,” she cut across him, calmly as she could manage. “Jon and I... we wanted to wait until after the battle to tell anyone, in case--”

“Your Grace!” Tyrion gasped, finally coming back into himself, having been stunned into rare silence at this revelation. “By the gods... but this is grand news!” He sobered, looking at her sternly. “I really wish this secretive nonsense would cease. And to ride out into battle while with child? Are you mad? What would have--”

He halted at her look, his righteous fury wilting. “I don’t think I need to explain to someone so clever what would have happened if I did not join the fight that night, my lord,” she scolded. “Or give my reasons as to why I waited to tell you.”

Tyrion smiled a bit sadly at that, knowing and chagrined. “I suppose you’re right, my queen, but there is much to be done and considered with this news, now that we know the truth of it.”

She deflated, thinking of the endless coddling, prattling on about safety and caution that had already proved tiresome in her time as a queen. She could not imagine what heights they would reach, now.

She was just going to dismiss her advisors, feeling as though if they spoke another word to her she might just pull her own hair out, when a knock came at her door. She felt a flash of irritation, adding to her discomfort. She had ordered solitude.

With one exception.

“Your Grace,” Arya Stark greeted her with a nod, never one for curtsying. “Jon is awake.”
All of her exhaustion left her, and she was on her feet and out the door without even a backward glance.

+++ 

Chapter End Notes

i’m sorry. i had to back away after all that mess, you know i had to. right?

anyway. i hope you like it my dear readers. i’m still here and i will go down with this ship. (i know there is not much in the way of jonerys in this chapter. i promise the next will be chock-full)

thank you to hardlyfatal for the once over. thank you to justwanderingneverlost for that insanely perfect mood board. and thank you to the Tarts and this magnificent, wonderful fandom for the support and light they have managed to provide in these dark, dark times.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!