The Death of Duty
by lyn452

Summary

Post Season 7. “What is honor compared to a woman’s love? And what is duty against the feel of a newborn?”

Notes

Takes place after Season 7 because I need something to tide me over until the final season in 2019 (or when Book 6 comes out, which I read GRRM said it may be finished in a few months and out by 2018, but knowing him that means sometime this decade, maybe) and I have too many ideas to ignore. This may pull from the books, but mostly the show since it’s been years since I read all of the books and a couple of weeks since I rewatched the series. Mostly Jonerys but other ships may show up.
#BoatSex
Jon observed the sunlight streaming in from the porthole, catching the silver hair of the woman whose bed he shared. This might be their last night together, even if it was no longer night, and he intended to soak in every detail. The light almost made him consider leaving. He and the queen were trying to keep their relationship secret. They acted like allies during the day, mapping strategies and plans to defeat the night king. He also tried to give her as much information as he could about the various Northern houses and the lords and ladies she would have to impress.

But then, Jon suspected they were doing a terrible job of actually keeping it secret. In no small part because he waited until late in the night to come to her bed, but he rarely left until hours after sunrise. She had asked (commanded?) him to stay that first night and he’d stayed for all the subsequent nights as well. He couldn’t say that he regretted it.

But Jon knew that Davos knew, as the old smuggler had commented to him a few days into the trip, “If you’re not planning on using that large cabin of yours. I wouldn’t mind getting out of the barracks.” Jon had refused, but knowing Davos, he hadn’t actually wanted his cabin. The old smuggler was enjoying being with other men of the sea after spending all his time with north men, Jon suspected. He was still a simple, common man at heart. It was what Jon liked best about his adviser.

And if Davos knew, there was no way that her small council, which had men like Varys and Tyrion, didn’t know. Daenerys had never said anything to him about it though. But he wasn’t sure if that meant none of her council wanted to confront her about it, which he doubted, or they had and she didn’t see the need to share those concerns with him. He wondered if it was a lack of trust, not wanting him to know her political motivations, or if she thought it was protecting him or at least not annoying him with her problems.

She shifted in her sleep, burrowing deeper. It made Jon smile softly. She was not a woman made for winter, his queen. He had never thought he would ever love a woman so different from anyone he’d known.

But then he’d loved Ygritte, a wilding woman, hadn’t he? He always seemed to fall for the wrong woman. With Ygritte, he knew there would be no happy ending, but he’d let himself love her anyway. With Daenerys, there were a million reasons not to be with her: they needed to focus on defeating the Night King, his people would hate him for it and it was possible he would end up betrayed again for his foolishness, she was a queen and he just a bastard, and on and on.

He reached out to softly caress her cheek. None of that had mattered to him though. He had decided to stop fighting it when he knocked on her door. He would not regret it. They could all die tomorrow. Even with her dragons and armies, defeating their enemy was a near impossible task. He had died once and he was prepared to give his life again.

Daenery’s eyes fluttered open, and Jon lost himself in her violet eyes. She would be the only thing he would miss. He loved his family and his men, but he had had so little time with her. He wanted a lifetime with her. Not a few weeks.

He should have stopped fighting the feelings he had for her much sooner. Should have taken her in his arms back in that cave, damn the consequences.
It was the second time he should have just stayed in a cave.

“It’s a little early to brood so intensely.” Daenerys’s soft voice broke through his thoughts. Her voice could be so soft, so unlike the queenly one she usually used. Jon counted himself lucky that he got to be one of the few who got to hear it. He leaned into the soft hand on his cheek, closing his eyes. “What are you thinking about?”

His eyes opened. “We’re arriving in White Harbor today. Davos told me last night.”

Her eyes clouded and Jon was almost happy to see that she was just as sad that their time outside of their responsibilities was coming to an end. They would have to play their roles again, she the Dragon Queen and him King in the North.

Or was he Warden now? He supposed they would have to work out his title before landing. Tyrion had mentioned not publicly announcing his bending the knee until they got to Winterfell, but it hadn’t gotten further than that. Which made Jon think the Hand of the Queen had plans for him beyond being Warden in the North.

Daenerys brought him out of his thoughts again. “Then we don’t have much time left.”

She kissed him. Jon would never tire of kissing her. Each time was like feeding an addiction, and instead of sating his lust for her, it just compounded it.

He moved her beneath him. A rough wave caused the boat to rock beneath them, causing him to press into her sooner than planned. Both gasped at the sensation.

Jon had always hated boats, but he understood Davos’ love for them better now. They seemed separate from the real world for these weeks. A man could lose himself and forget his duty out on the waves. The boat rocked again, causing him to push into her again. He had always hated the constant motion on boats, but maybe he could learn to love that about them too.

He pulled back and looked at the naked queen again. His memories would forever link his queen with boats and sailing now. She was so beautiful. His eyes trailed over her perfect body, attempting to memorize everything for the lonely nights ahead.

Daenerys pushed him back, climbing atop him. She sat up, furs no longer covering them. Jon shivered, but knew he wouldn’t stay chilled for long. They kissed again. Her hand dropped between them to tease him. He returned the favor, his fingers finding her wet and ready. He hardened completely at the thought of being inside her.

He stopped her hand when it was growing to be too much. She didn’t always stop, he discovered from other times, never let him command her. He just asked and hoped for the best.

She really was a dragon, but gods, did he love riding her.

Even when she continued stroking him against his wishes, he couldn’t really complain. It usually ended with his eyes rolled back and his seed on her hand or body, or once, swallowed.

She allowed him to stop her today, instead moving to line him up against her. She sank on him without warning and he groaned in response. His hands gripped her hips too tightly, but he didn’t care if they bruised. She would be fully covered in her furs this far north.

She moved, using some slow technique that drove him mad. He groaned. He much preferred when she rode him with abandon, as this slow rolling didn’t allow him a quick release, but kept him on the edge for what felt like hours.
He looked up at his queen. He was certain she knew all of this and did it to torture him. Even now she smirked down at him as she groped her breasts. He groaned again. She would be the death of him.

But he couldn’t imagine a better way to go.

His hand moved between their bodies, touching her in an attempt to speed her along. She moaned at the contact but didn’t change her pace. Frustrated, Jon tried to flip her, but she resisted with more strength than seemed possible for her small frame. His eyes closed. He was at her mercy.

She kept her slow and steady pace, but eventually bent down to place kisses to his chest. She lingered on the scar over his heart. Jon had already told her the full story, but he still wasn’t comfortable with his previous death. Until meeting her, he’d often wished he had never been brought back.

Finally, she speed up. Jon’s head fell back and he strangled a shout in his throat. He tried to be quiet. They both did. No reason to wake the whole ship. No reason to eliminate all doubt as to what he did in her room in the late hours and early morning. But it wasn’t always possible.

Daenerys moved her lips up his body before taking his ear lobe between her perfect teeth and biting softly. He groaned. She pulled back, just to tease him before diving back in and brushing her lips against his ear. “My king,” she whispered. Jon wasn’t sure he’d ever get used to the title, but gods, did he love hearing it from her lips. He gripped her tighter, thrusting up hard. She moaned in response.

He found her mouth with his, and kissed her until her lips were pink and swollen. He whispered against them, “My queen.”

After that they both found their climaxes. She milked him of everything he had, and he hoped against hope that his seed took. It was a strange hope for him. It had once been his biggest fears, getting a girl pregnant, fathering a bastard. But then, a child with Daenerys wouldn’t be a bastard. He would marry her. It would make it easier if she did get pregnant. There would be no politics involved. No northern lords grumbling about foreign whores and mad king’s daughters. No, they would understand why the honorable Ned Stark’s bastard son would refuse to father a bastard himself. Why he would do the right and honorable thing.

They might not understand why he got her pregnant in the first place, but seven hells, he was proof of passion gripping even the best men.

She moved her head down to rest on his chest, and he wrapped his arms around her. Happy to just enjoy being with her for a moment before he would be forced to sneak out to his own room.

He loved her. So much. Neither one of them had said it, as though they had silently agreed never to say it out loud. It wasn’t real until it was spoken.

That was nonsense of course. He would die to save Daenerys. He would kill for her. He would do anything to be with her, to have her.

He suspected she felt the same.

Jon took one of her hands and brought it up to his lips. She smiled up at him from her position on his chest. He kept his hand in hers, twining their fingers together and playing with each other’s. He felt so peaceful here.

But it couldn’t last. He said, “Ser Davos said we’re going to reach White Harbor today.”
Daenerys was no longer looking at him, but he guessed she was frowning now. “I wish we never had to leave this ship.”

“Aye,” Jon agreed.

He didn’t want to ask, had been putting it off, but he had to now. “What happens with this?”

Daenerys sighed, “I don’t know. I know the smart thing is to keep it under wraps. Not complicate my relations with the north more.”

“But?” Jon held out hope that what she’d just said was horseshit.

“But,” she agreed, “I am a queen. I should be able to do as I please.” Her head dropped back to her pillow. “Sometimes I miss Essos, where no one cared who warmed whose bed.”

“Is that what I am?” Jon grinned, scooping her up, moving her under him so he could kiss her again. “A bed warmer.”

Daenerys returned his smile, “Well, it’s quite cold in the north.”

Jon laughed. It was a rare sound anymore. He kissed her again, and began to move down her body.

They had time for one more round, he decided. Not caring about the sun still climbing through the port window.

Davos inhaled the smell of salt water, remembering a time that seemed like another life ago. When he’d been a simple smuggler with simple dreams and ambitions. That man would have never dreamed of being the Hand to two kings. He never would have guessed how much tragedy and stuff of legends awaited his future.

Truth be told, Davos envied that man.

A dragon swooping down for fish broke any illusion of his once simple life. He still couldn’t believe such creatures existed. Tyrion’s words echoed for him, “I’d say you get used to them, but you never really do.”

He saw the small man approaching him as the thought crossed his mind. He nodded in greeting. The dwarf tipped his wineskin before taking a pull. It seemed a bit early for drinking, but Davos kept that thought to himself. Men were allowed their vices and there were worse ones than drink. The other man stepped beside him, looking out to the shore with him.

Tyrion said, “The captain tells me that we’re set to reach White Harbor today.”

“Aye,” Davos agreed.

“Do you know Lord Manderly?”

“We met briefly.” It had been on the trip down. They had spent a night at his keep. Jon had been completely focused on getting to Dragonstone, and declined the feast in his honor, preferring to sleep and leave in the morning. Davos wondered what it was like to serve other kings, ones who enjoyed the attention and honor given to them. A king who wanted to be king. Stannis had never
liked the trappings his brother had enjoyed, hadn’t even wanted to be king. He merely felt it had been his duty to take the throne.

Jon Snow had been a bastard, he barely knew how to be a lord, let alone be a king. He only served his people because he knew the enemy they faced, knew that someone had to lead them. His new king struggled with the pageantry of kingship, though Davos suspected that Northmen and women liked that about their king.

Davos studied the former Lord beside him. He doubted the Dragon Queen and her council had any such struggles. Daenerys always looked and acted the part of regal queen. Her Hand always wore the pin that denoted his station. Tyrion spoke, “I met him years ago. When King Robert came up to visit Winterfell. That feels like another lifetime.” Tyrion took another pull. “Though Wyman Manderly gave Robert a run for his money for the fattest man in the realms.”

Davos chuckled. “Aye, I heard the men call him Sir Too-Fat-To-Sit-His-Horse.”

“As far as insulting nicknames go, I think I have him beat.” Tyrion took another drink.

Davos had always heard the dwarf was funny. It was nice to find that had been true.

“Tell me, one hand to another.” Davos didn’t correct him. He didn’t have that official title. Not with Jon Snow. “What do you think of our monarchs’ relationship?”

Davos swallowed. He had no mind for these political dealings and knew that Tyrion was a master. The dwarf snorted, “Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about.”

“I wasn’t going to.” Davos thought for a moment before saying, “It could be a good thing. An alliance between a southern queen and northern king. Might bring the Seven Kingdoms together.”

“Jon Snow has already bent the knee. I’m not sure that Daenerys Targaryen should be marry a bastard.” Davos wondered if that was the dwarf’s true feelings on the matter but didn’t press. “Besides I wasn’t talking about that. A marriage isn’t a bad idea, there are few better prospects for either of them. I meant their relationship.”

Davos knew what he was talking about. A man would have to be blind not to see it. “Love ruins the realm.”

Tyrion nodded, “That it does.”

“But love can save it too.” Davos said. “Men fight harder when they have a woman waiting for them.”

A look passed over the dwarf’s face. An odd mixture of longing, loss, regret and anger, as though he was reliving a painful memory. “True. But that doesn’t really work with women who aren’t the waiting sort.”

Davos nodded. He didn’t know the Dragon Queen that well, but her actions beyond the wall showed him she wasn’t the waiting sort. She was a queen who would fight for her people. Davos looked up to see the two dragons she had left from that mission. He admired her for it. It helped him understand how his king could have fallen in so deep with her despite claiming “There was no time for that.”

The young king seemed to be learning that when the world was ending, you had to make time for it. Otherwise, what was the point?
Davos wished he could put his thoughts into words as well as the Queen’s Hand, but he only had his limited skill. “Love can be a weakness or a strength, it just depends on the man. How he uses it to fuel his actions.”

Tyrion snorted. “Sounds like something I once told Jon Snow.”

“All dwarfs are bastards in their father’s eyes,” Davos quoted.

“No, that the world will never let you forget your status, so you must wear it like armor.” Davos could see the wheels turning in the dwarf’s head. “They must not let their love be used against them. It must be their shield and strength against the world. Not by the Northern Lords. Not by my sister. Not even by the evils beyond the wall.”

“Easier said than done,” Davos pointed out. “How do you plan on doing that?”

Tryion took another drink. “Well, that’s the crux of it, but then, I’ve always enjoyed riddles.”

Tormund had been running since he’d seen the Night King’s dragon. He vaguely thought that he should have asked Jon Snow for a horse, and instruction on how to ride a horse. He had seen firsthand the devastating effect they could have in battle. And this trip would have been easier with a mount.

But horses weren’t the free folk way, and he didn’t want to turn into a southerner. He knew he was already comprising more of his beliefs than he’d ever thought he would. But they had to adapt. They were all fighting monsters, distinctions like free folk, crows and southerners no longer mattered.

They could all go back to hating and killing each other afterwards.

He jumped at every shadow overhead, terrified it was the Night King with his newly resurrected dragon, come to kill him off. But the Night King hadn’t seemed interested in the men fleeing from the wall, just busting a gap in it.

Tormund wouldn’t have thought it possible if he hadn’t witnessed it himself. He’d climbed the damn thing a thousand times, but he still regarded it with a certain amount of awe. Thought it would keep the white walkers out where it failed against his people.

He hated being wrong.

A great keep appeared at the horizon. Tormund didn’t know what the fuck Jon Snow’s people called the place. Didn’t care, really. He just knew they would have ravens. He had to get a message to Winterfell, to Jon Snow.

The Great War had started, and the Night King had struck the first devastating blow.
Sansa was overseeing preparations for the queen’s (and Jon’s) arrival. She remembered the last time Winterfell had hosted a royal visit. It had felt like a lifetime ago. She’d watched her mother make all of the preparations and helped her where she could. Her mother had smiled at her insistence on learning how to be a lady. “You are growing up too fast my child,” she’d said before pressing a kiss to her cheek. Sansa had been so excited. So ready for something different than dreary, boring Winterfell.

How badly that had all gone. How stupid she had been.

A stab of pain went through Sansa’s heart at the thought of her mother. How she missed her, wished she was still here to guide her. Sansa had family again, but Bran and Arya were so changed. She’d never been close to Jon and his role as King in the North kept him away from her even when he’d been here.

Or was he still King? He’d signed his last note as Warden. It didn’t matter, not right now. She would see him soon. They would talk then. Or at least she’d talk, probably loudly. He’d given the north away without a fight to a strange queen, he had to know his homecoming wouldn’t be a completely warm one. Even Robb, who the men now called the King who Lost the North when they thought she was out of earshot, had put up a fight before losing everything.

Thinking of Robb just made her sad again and brought her back to thinking of her mother. Sansa often wondered how it had happened exactly. She’d heard stories, but still longed to know the full truth. She dismissed the Frey’s version outright. The idea that Robb turned into a wolf and attacked them was ludicrous.

She wasn’t sad the House of Frey was no more, just as she didn’t mourn the loss of House Bolton.

Sansa forced the bad memories away, focusing again on her mother and how she’d prepared the house for the last royal visit. Sansa tried to copy her mother now. It wouldn’t be grand as the last time, but the Dragon Queen would just have be fine with it. Winter was here and war was upon them.

A woman screaming interrupted Sansa’s thoughts. She looked over to where the commotion was and saw the cause immediately. White and huge, Jon’s direwolf Ghost was silently moving around the courtyard. Ghost had mostly stayed away from Winterfell in Jon’s absence. Sansa wondered if the wolf somehow knew that his master was returning. She watched the massive creature with its strange red eyes and thought about how like Jon the wolf was, quiet, serious and avoids people. All of their direwolves had ultimately reflected their owners.

She thought of Lady. How different would have her life been if Lady had never been killed? People would have thought twice about hurting her with a direwolf by her side, even though Lady had never been violent.
Sansa had never been violent either, but that had changed. She had to change. The world was a cruel place, not made for soft girls with silly dreams.

She made her way to the kitchens, her biggest concern was food. Winterfell’s population was about to explode. Jon hadn’t been very forthcoming with details. Would she be expected to feed the queen’s armies? She was trying to prepare as best she could but it was hard to do without the exact numbers or plans.

Not that she didn’t understand why Jon wouldn’t send detailed plans to her via raven. Ravens could be killed and intercepted. She just wished he was back, helping her. She was tired of guessing as to what he was doing. He’d been gone for months. He should have been with his people, not chasing dragon queens.

Then again, he had accomplished what he set out to do. He was returning with weapons, armies and dragons. He had gotten the north their best chance of survival.

But had he really had to bend the knee to do it?

These were all conversations she would have when he arrived. Lord Baelish had been poisoning her against her against her brother even before Jon had gone south. His whispers forcing her to think the worst of Jon.

She was glad he was gone now, wished she had ordered Arya’s knife through his throat much sooner.

Sansa walked through the courtyard that was mostly used as a training ground these days. She was preparing the people for war as best she could, as Jon had ordered. But she was not a lady of war. She didn’t know exactly how to best do it. She had relied heavily on Brienne’s assistance with that along with the other northern lords who split their time between Winterfell and their own homes.

“My lady,” Brienne’s squire approached. Podrick, Sansa thought was his name. He was holding out a scroll. “A message came for Jon Snow.”

Sansa accepted it. Podrick stood nearby, waiting for any following orders. She broke the seal and read the message, its scrawl barely legible as though written by someone in a hurry who didn’t write that well to begin with.

The message read:

*The wall has fallen. Night King has dragon. Send men and blonde beauty.*

It wasn’t signed, but Sansa guessed it was from one of Jon’s wildlings by the bewildering contents of it. The redhead one probably. She had no idea who the blonde beauty referred to but mostly understood the rest of the terrifying message. The seal had been from Last Hearth, the closest stronghold from the Wall.

The dead were coming to Winterfell.

She looked to the old squire, “Send a raven to Jon, now,” she commanded. He ran off. Sansa watched him run.

Winter was here. The Long Night had arrived. Jon belonged her with the rest of his family, with his people. Ghost looked at her from his place across the courtyard. Sansa remembered her father’s words. “The lone wolf dies, only the pack survives.”
The Starks were a pack of wolves, strongest together. She’d learned that lesson in the hardest way possible.

White Harbor wasn’t like the seaport cities Daenerys knew from Essos. The massive stone she’d seen on their approach here was unlike anything she’d ever seen. Now, sailing into the inner harbor, she was surprised to see a massive fortress covered in barnacles overlooking the port. Wolf’s Den, Tyrion had told her. She could see from here there was a party waiting for them to dock.

She moved away from the side of the boat, not wanting to give the crowd too early a peak at her. She’d planned her outfit carefully, decked out in the Targaryen colors of black and red. She’d sent Drogon and Rhaegal off away from the harbor, fearful they would appear as a threat.

Overall, Daenerys was a little nervous at her first meeting with a northern lord, but she was confident she could handle it. She had to handle it. She clasped her hands together in an effort to hide any nerves. Looking across the deck, she spotted Jon talking to Ser Davos. He looked the same as always. Direwolf armor over worn leathers. Missandei had spent over an hour helping Daenerys transform into the Dragon Queen. Jon Snow may have washed prior to dressing for his role as the King in the North.

She understood that northerners didn’t seem to care for the pageantry of royalty, but she wondered just how long Jon Snow expected to stay king without the physical trapping to signify his status as one.

Then again, he’d already bent the knee to her. He’d keep his crown for as long as she allowed him to keep it.

She looked away. She spent far too much time thinking about Jon Snow these days, and they had agreed to keep their distance once they reached shore. Tyrion was absorbed in conversation with Varys and Missandei, so she really had no one to make conversation with as she waited for the boat to dock.

Her eyes glanced over to Jon Snow again. She was beginning to realize already that her promises to Jon and Tyrion that she’d keep her distance were false ones. She couldn’t even keep her eyes from him.

But then his eyes met hers, dark and wanting, and she knew she wasn’t alone in her failing.

“Your grace,” Tyrion’s voice forced her to look away. Her Hand looked concerned. Of course he did. He’d asked her for one thing on this trip – try not to make it blatantly obvious that you’re in love with Jon Snow. They hadn’t even gotten off the boat yet and she was already failing.

Her hand looked over to where she’d been staring and saw the King in the North. A quick glance informed her that Jon had deliberately shifted his gaze away as well. Tyrion was frowning and Daenerys could guess his words before he said them, “You are terrible at pretending that you’re not in love with him.”

She tried to keep her pride in her response, “I’m better at it than he is.”

“Yes, but he’s completely terrible at it.” Tyrion sighed. “Jorah is just as obvious. Why can’t you
pick a man capable of being subtle for your lover? Daario was the most subtle one I’ve met, and that’s saying something.”

It was. Daenerys doubted that Daario had ever been described as subtle before this moment. Daenerys corrected him, “Jorah was never my lover.”

“No, but we both know he’s just as in love with you as any of your lovers have been.”

Daenerys shifted her shoulders, Jorah’s feelings for her always made her uncomfortable. She loved him as dear friend and surrogate father or older brother, but knew his feelings were more lustful than that. She decided a change in topic was in order. “Tell me about House Manderly.”

“We’ve been over this.”

“Yes, let’s go over it again.”

Tyrion studied his queen, but instead of saying whatever he was thinking, he said, “House Manderly has held White Harbor for a thousand years, dating back to King Jon Stark.”

Daenerys had a small smile at the name thinking of the current King Jon Stark (well, he was a Stark in all but name). The smile didn’t escape Tyrion, and he rolled his eyes at the sight of it. Daenerys didn’t care. She knew her Hand thought her a silly girl with a crush, and maybe she was, even though she had thought herself far past such things. But she was still just a young girl who had been lonely most of her life. Being a queen hadn’t changed that, if anything it had made her even lonelier as she gained friends but they were also her followers.

It was nice to put the queen aside and just be a woman in love, even if just for a little while.

But as the boat drew closer to where she could see the overweight lord waiting on the docks as more than a colorful blob in the distance, she knew that it was time again to put the woman aside again and become the queen once more. Her back straightened and her chin lifted, her face lost any trace of emotion, the queenly mask slipping back onto its comfortable position.

Missandei took her place by the queen’s side. They had discussed yesterday that there would be no announcement of all of her titles today. The introductions would be less formal though Missandei would still be the one to speak for her queen initially. Daenerys wanted give an impression of distance and haughtiness. She knew it was a gamble and Jon had warned her against it, telling her she wasn’t likely to win friends, but if the Northmen expected a foreign queen she would give them that.

Besides she thought it would be better to appear made of ice than show her true fiery nature. She didn’t want to invite comparisons to her father. She could soften later, now she had to show her strength.

The boat jerked a bit as the sailors ran around, tying it off to the dock. They readied the gangplank and Jon and Davos waited at its top to cross first. It had also been discussed whether she should stay at Jon’s side, show off their alliance. But Tyrion had argued hard against it. He wanted the northerners to see Daenerys as her own queen, repeatedly said that she had to win the hearts of the North on her own, separate from their king.

She had agreed, even though she hated being parted from Jon even a little bit. But she had to give Tyrion something, she’d been ignoring his advice too much lately. And she knew he was right, knew that her affair with the King in the North was going to cause problems and it would be best to put those problems off for as long as possible.
Jon glanced back at her. She could see in his dark grey eyes, he wished she was standing beside him as much as she wished to be by his side. He always held so much emotion in his eyes, even as the rest of his appearance remained stoic. She loved that about him. How he could be so easy and hard to read simultaneously.

Tyrion was going to kill, or at the very least sternly lecture, them both. They were going to fail miserably at hiding their feelings.

The gangplank secure, the king and his advisor crossed to great the lord. Daenerys could hear the man’s loud, boisterous greeting from where she was standing. She couldn’t see as well now, as they had wanted to hide her a bit, give those waiting the full effect of seeing her for the first time, but she wondered if they were kneeling before their king.

Her mind supplied a picture of the one time she had knelt before Jon Snow and she tried to repress the blush that rose to her cheeks. This was not the time to be thinking of such things.

Davos was supposed to signal to Tyrion when to come down, as Jon would introduce her. She knew he only knew a couple of her titles at best and nearly chuckled at the thought of him trying to imitate Missandei’s well practiced introduction.

Tyrion nodded at something out of her sight and signaled for her to step forward. He walked in front along with Varys, both were familiar, if not loved, faces in Westeros. Daenerys and Missandei would follow. Daenerys glanced at her friend/hand maiden/advisor and Missandei squeezed her hand briefly to let her know she was beside her.

Daenerys’ heart squeezed at the unconditional, unwavering support of Missandei. What would Daenerys do without her?

Daenerys inhaled and walked forward with a practiced sureness. She saw all of the heads on the dock turn to her, they were all men and she could see widened eyes followed by a lustful sweeping over her body in most of them.

To Lord Wyman Manderly’s credit, he looked at her coolly, giving away nothing of what he thought of her. He nodded his head, “My lady.”

Missandei corrected him, “Your lord, Daenerys Stormborn is a queen. The proper way to address her is with your grace.”

The fat man’s attention shifted to the former slave. “She is not my queen.”

Daenerys face hardened but she said nothing. Tyrion broke the awkward silence that had sprung up. “My Lord, I have not been here in many years, but it appears White Harbor is prepared for winter.”

Lord Manderly’s look softened and he grinned, “Aye. We may be the smallest city in Westeros, but we are the only northern one. We are built to weather winter, unlike you soft southern houses.”

“I’ll have you know, I was born in a harsh winter. We southern houses do just fine, just because we’re not mad like you northern houses, choosing to live in the coldest, harshest parts of the world.”

Manderly laughed boisterously, his large belly shaking. “I had forgotten how funny you are, half-man.”

Daenerys glanced at Tyrion, knowing he didn’t like such nicknames. But he didn’t seem bothered
by it. The fat lord gestured to the road, “Come let us go to New Castle. I haven’t arranged any horses as I thought the queen may want to see the city properly being her first time here and all.”

Daenerys’s eyes met Tyrion’s, both worried about a trick or possible assassination attempt. But Tyrion said, “That is very kind of you, my lord. Our queen always enjoys seeing more of her kingdom.”

He gestured for her guards to tighten their formation around her though, just in case. They walked slowly, too many of them huddled together to move swiftly. Lord Manderly pointed out certain buildings, explaining their histories. Daenerys looked to Jon, who looked bored and impatient as they walked along but was trying his best to be polite.

The common people surrounded them as they moved. She could feel their stares and see their fingers pointing as they whispered to each other, both at her silver hair and to their king. Some even kneeled as they passed. She did her best impression of not noticing, despite hearing the odd “mad king” or “foreign whore.”

Jon was walking slower, she noticed, until she caught up to him. They walked in line with each other now, him to her left and Lord Manderly to her right. If the northern lord noticed, he didn’t comment on it. Probably made it easier for him to address them both together anyway.

It certainly made it easier for the commonfolk pointing at them. They only had one target now for their jeers and admirations.

Lord Manderly addressed Daenerys, “Pardon me, my lady, but I had heard rumors you had dragons.”

For the first time, Daenerys spoke directly to him, “Yes, but I have them keeping some distance from your city. They can be a terrifying sight to some, and I didn’t want to frighten your people.”

“My people do not frighten easily, my lady. They are north men and women. The toughest people in the world.”

Daenerys’ eyes narrowed. “Do you know the stories of Balerion the Black Dread?”

“Every child in Westeros has heard those legends,” the response came from Lord Manderly’s son who was following closely behind them. He was nearly as fat as his father.

Daenerys continued, “People often remark that my largest, Drogon, is Balerion’s reincarnation.”

Lord Manderly, “I’m sorry, my lady. But dragons are nothing more than fairy tales nowadays. It will take more than some winged lizards to impress me and my folk. If they exist at all.”

Drogon, always spot on with his timing, roared in the distance. Every northern head turned to the sound, seeing the tiny black shape, almost like a strange bird off in the distance. Daenerys contained her smirk, “My children are always near me, Lord Manderly. I can call them, if you would like a closer look. Though I must warn you to be on your best behavior as they are quite protective of their mother.”

Wyman visibly gulped, darting a look to his son. Then he looked to his king, “Have you seen these dragons?”

“Aye,” Jon said. “They are no lizards, my lord.”

Wyman nodded, keeping his head down. He said little else for the rest of their walk to New Castle.
One of his granddaughters escorted Daenerys to her room. She was pretty enough, chestnut hair and a pleasant figure. She had introduced herself as Wynafryd. To be honest, Daenerys had been more curious about the other one, Wylla, who had green hair, but she had escorted the king to his chambers. Daenerys tried not to think too much on that, Manderly having his pretty granddaughter escort the king rather than himself or his son.

She dismissed the lady to be alone with her thoughts for a moment. They were to hold a war council meeting followed by a feast. The Lord had had the audacity to suggest she wasn’t needed at the war council meeting. “You should leave men’s matters to the men, my lady.”

She had replied, “It is my men you will be discussing. What kind of queen would I be to let others control their fates?”

It had shut him up but she knew the fight with him was far from over.

And Jon had told her that House Manderly would be one of the easier houses. She sighed. So much work ahead of her. She had spent her entire life fighting, and she was just so tired of it. She had just wanted to return home. Her dream of a house with a red door and a lemon tree had never felt so far away.

If she was being completely honest with herself, lately she had been toying with adding a certain broody wolf to that vision. But that would be even more impossible, he had just as many duties and responsibilities as she did. Neither of them could afford a break or a nice, normal life.

Daenerys turned to look at the trunk of her outfits. She didn’t see a need to dress differently for the war council, but maybe she should wear something else for the feast. She thought of the leather bustier she had in there with its heavy skirt and black fur wrap that had been designed specially to seduce.

She imagined the look on Jon’s face if she was to wear that. She smiled, he had a hard enough time keeping his eyes off her chest when everything was covered. He might faint at the loss of blood in his head.

Then again, he’d seen them uncovered now, hadn’t he? His tongue had explored them completely. His hands had held their weight. Even his dick had felt what it was like to be surrounded by their softness.

She shook the thoughts away, since when was she this dirty minded? She wouldn’t wear that outfit anyway. It painted her as the foreign temptress, the exact opposite image she wanted to project.

She checked her reflection in the looking glass. Her pupils were blown wide, but other than that she still looked the part of a queen. She gave her eyes a moment to return to normal before leaving for the meeting.

The meeting was mostly review for Daenerys. Jon explained the plans they had made aboard the
ship to his northern lord. Occasionally Tyrion would add something, but mostly Jon did the talking. It reminded her of the presentation at the Dragon Pit.

It gave her a good reason to keep her eyes trained on Jon. He never looked better than when passionately explaining how he was going to defend and protect his people. Except for maybe when he was nude and passionately exploring her body.

Stop it, she scolded herself. This is not the time or the place for that.

When Jon finished the younger lord, Wylis, nodded at her. “What’s the Targaryen doing while we risk our lives?”

Jon answered, “Daenerys and her dragons will act as support to all units. The dragons can move faster than any army, even the Dothraki.”

Wylis didn’t look convinced, “We shouldn’t be fighting with slaves and savages anyway.”

Daenerys always hated it when her armies were dismissed as much. The Unsullied were freed men, she’d seen to that, and the Dothraki were her people as much as those in Westeros, not savages.

Before she could say anything Jon Snow said, “It doesn’t matter who you think we should be fighting with. They are good fighting men. We will need every living person to win. These men you call slaves and savages may die for a land that’s not theirs against an enemy they needn’t face. They are willing to die for your people, your homes, and you. Don’t dismiss them as though they are nothing.”

Daenerys tried to repress it, but she knew the look she gave Jon Snow at that moment was a clear signal of her devotion to him. If they’d been alone, she would have kissed him for his words.

Looking around the table the only person looking at her was the elder Lord Manderly, his eyes narrowed at her in suspicion. She ignored him, putting her cool mask back in place. She promised herself it would not drop again.

But it seemed Lord Wyman Manderly had decided to test her, “Lady Targaryen, my House has always had a good relationship with yours.”

She wanted to correct him on her title, but she stopped herself. “Until you didn’t,” Daenerys replied coolly. “Your house sided with the usurper in the rebellion, if I remember correctly.”

Manderly shrugged, “Your brother kidnapped and raped Lyanna Stark, my lady.”

Daenerys kept her temper. Barely. “On the word of Robert Baratheon, and what else would he say but my brother was an evil man? It wouldn’t do for him to have been the villain in the story. The man who tore apart the realm and murdered children because the woman he wanted loved another man.”

Daenerys realized that she hadn’t kept her temper. She hadn’t known her eldest brother, may have idealized him too much, painted him as the brother she wanted, what Viserys hadn’t been. But even if he’d been a deeply flawed man, he was still her brother and she would defend her brother.

The northern men were silent for a moment, shifting in their seats. Even Jon looked uncomfortable.

“I am loyal to the North, my lady. I will always remain loyal to the North,” Lord Manderly replied.

Daenerys regarded him. “And your loyalty is admirable, Lord Manderly, which is not something I
can say for all the northern houses.” Then tension had rose even further at that comment and Daenerys could feel Tyrion’s gaze on her, asking her to practice caution. “I am queen of all Seven Kingdoms, which includes the North.”

“By what right?” Wyman’s son interrupted. Daenerys didn’t take her eyes from his father. “All you have is a name.”

“Yes, and my name is all I had for a long time, but I managed well with it, I think. I could have marched North with Blood and Fire. I could force you to bow to me, but I won’t because there isn’t time for that now. My armies and my dragons came here to defend you. I am Protector of the Realm, and I intend to live up to that title.”

Wyman’s expression didn’t change but he said, “I must confess you are not what I expected.”

“What did you expect?” Daenerys suspected she knew the answer but wanted to hear what he would say to her.

“A girl. Or a madwoman. You are neither of those things. You might even be a queen.” He stood. “That’s enough war talk. I’m hungry.” He nodded to his king. “We’ll see your majesty,” his eyes flickered back to Daenerys, “and his guest at the feast.”

Jon nodded. They had covered everything that needed to be covered. Daenerys knew something important had taken place in that last conversation with Wyman Manderly.

She just wasn’t sure if it was good or bad.

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Daenerys sat on the stool facing the simple vanity in her room. She wasn’t sure what to wear to feast or if she should just say in her current outfit. A knock on her door sounded, thinking it was Missandei to help her, Daenerys called, “Come in.”

She was surprised to find Jon Snow entering, closing the door softly behind him after looking down the halls. She wondered if he’d had to sneak past the guards posted at her door or if they’d let him pass. The Unsullied were completely loyal to her, but then they knew she was close to the king.

It didn’t matter. She doubted he was here to kill her. But from his look, she could also tell he wasn’t here to ravish her either. He seemed guarded.

“You really believe that, don’t you? About your brother.”

Daenerys wasn’t surprised he wanted to follow-up on that meeting, but she didn’t understand why that was question. “Yes,” she answered.

Jon’s hands went to his hips. “You can’t say that to Northmen. Not ever. Lyanna Stark was an innocent victim. Beloved by all. The North went to war for her. My uncle and grandfather died for her. My father fought and overthrew a king for her.”

Daenerys didn’t like people telling her what to do, not even him. She stood. “I never knew him, Rhaegar, so I only have stories to judge him by. Even in the worst ones, he’s an honorable man who is not mad or dumb. The only explanation left for his actions before the rebellion is love. He
loved her.” She met Jon’s eyes. “Brave men in love are the stupidest men in existence, I find.”

“Maybe he did love her, but that doesn’t mean Lyanna wasn’t still stolen and raped.”

“I may not know everything about the Starks, but what I do know is that a Stark woman wouldn’t allow herself to be stolen away unless she wanted to be.”

Jon was taken aback, but shook his head. “That goes against everything I’ve been taught about Rhaegar and Lyanna. What every person in the North knows of them. My father knew them both and fought to free his sister. Rhaegar may not have been a total monster, but he abandoned his wife and children to kidnap and rape my aunt.”

“Yes, he put aside his political marriage and left his children. He wasn’t a perfect man. But I will never believe Robert Baratheon’s lies.”

“Robert Baratheon…”

But she didn’t let him finish. “Robert Baratheon spent his life trying to kill me. He sent killers after me when I was a newborn in my crib, when I was a child desperate for a home, and when I was a pregnant young wife. You will never convince me of his goodness. I don’t care if your father loved him.”

They stared at each other for a moment. This had been their first real fight since he’d bent the knee.

Jon spoke carefully, softly, “Did you hate my father too?”

Daenerys inhaled, calming herself, “I never gave Ned Stark much thought, to be honest.”

Jon nodded. His eyes studied her but she could tell by his tight jaw that wasn’t what he had wanted to hear. “We’re going to be late for the feast,” he said.

She nodded. “I need to change.” It was a dismissal.

Jon looked like he wanted to say more, but he marched out of the room.

The banquet hall was full and the tables were of seafood dishes. Daenerys tried to put on a happy face, but between the fight and the fact she looked at all the food before her and thought it may be needed in the war ahead and for the long winter they were facing. She’d done enough to isolate herself from her allies today though and kept her counsel on it.

Jon was seated on the opposite of the great table she was at, which was for the best she thought. But she had wished she could have been seated with her small council. Instead she had been sat with the wives and granddaughters. She made polite conversation with them, but she really didn’t know much about needlepoint or fabrics. She answered their questions about Essos attire as best she could, but there wasn’t much to say other than it was a lot of silk and linen and a lot less modesty.

The women seemed nice enough, even clever at times. Daenerys tried to enjoy their company, but she didn’t trust them enough to be honest and open with them. However when the two older women left to see to some matters in the kitchens, the younger granddaughters started giggling.
immediately and leaned in, “Your grace, what is like to ride a dragon? Is as wonderful as riding a horse but better?”

“Or is more like riding a horse rider?”

“Wylla,” the older sister reproached.

Daenerys raised an eyebrow. Pleased to be addressed properly and surprised by the girls were not the perfectly mannered ladies she’d been told all northern girls were.

Then again she’d received that advice from lords. What did they know about how ladies acted when they weren’t around?

For the first time that night she began to enjoy herself, “More like a horse. Though dragons are much wider than horses, so your seat is different.”

“Well, you haven’t been with a fat man then.”

“Wyalla,” the sister hissed again.

“What Wynafred? The queen has eyes, she can see all the fat men here.”

“This is not appropriate dinner conversation.”

“I think the guest should decide,” the green-haired woman turned to her.

Daenerys had been right, she was more interesting than her sister. “Inappropriate, yes, but far more interesting than needlepoint.”

Wyalla grinned. “I knew I would like you.”

Well, that was one person in the North, Daenerys thought. Wynafred shook her head. “Don’t encourage her, your grace.”

Daenerys took a sip of the black beer she hadn’t touched since it had been placed before her. She preferred wine, but she understood why the White Harbor beer was famous.

Wyalla said, “I’m just introducing her to the true north. Her grace should know that most north men aren’t as comely as the king. What’s he like anyway?”

Daenerys was back on alert, knowing saying anything about the King in the North could be problematic. She couldn’t insult him but couldn’t look like she knew him too well or liked him too much. “He’s very…” she struggled for a good word. Looking across the table she saw him with his standard gloomy scowl. “…broody.”

Wyalla laughed and even Wynafred smiled. “Aye, I’ve heard that about him. A gloomy fuck is what I think our bannerman called him.”

Wynafred tutted. “You shouldn’t say such things. One of us may marry him.”

Daenery’s eyebrow twitched. It wasn’t hard to believe. Of course the northern lords would be trying to marry their daughters to him. She took a much longer sip of beer this time.

Wyalla shrugged, “Grandfather was too slow last time. He never even managed to bring it up to Robb Stark before the Young Wolf got himself engaged. Think he’ll be quicker this time?”
As if on cue, Lord Manderly stood. His voice wasn’t booming, like he was making an announcement to the entire hall, but it was loud enough that no one at the high table could have missed it. Everyone stopped talking and eating to focus on his words.

“King Snow, our families have been allies for many generations. I am proud to serve House Stark, even to man who doesn’t hold the name.” Jon’s shoulders shifted. “I have considered your proposal and have decided to send my 5,000 men with you.”

The Manderly men all nodded in agreement, banging their mugs on the table. Jon nodded in gratitude. Lord Manderly continued, “Along with that, I would like to propose a more permanent alliance between our houses. You are unmarried and I have two unmarried granddaughters. I would offer you your choice as a bride.”

He gestured to the woman sitting next to Daenerys. Wynafred blushed and Wyalla smirked. Daenerys wondered how much of this was planned. There was no surprise in either woman’s expression. Had this been planned since Jon sent the raven that he’d be coming to White Harbor?

Daenerys felt her heart stop. Was he still upset with her? Only at the thought of losing him did she realize how desperate she was to have him. She realized she would promise to let go of her hatred of Robert Baratheon to have Jon. She would burn these two sweet ladies alive to keep them from him.

It shook her to know just how far gone she really was when it came to loving Jon Snow. She glanced at Tyrion. He was right to be worried about her and her love for the northern king. She just didn’t realize how right he was until this moment.

The Manderly men banged their cups again, with shouts of “Here, here,” and few grumblings of “Lucky bastard.”

Jon looked flabbergasted, like he’d never even considered someone would ever want him to marry their granddaughters. He blinked a few times, before collecting himself. “Your lord, I…” He swallowed before starting again, “Any man would be lucky to take such beauties for a wife as your granddaughters.” He stalled there. Daenerys almost pitied him. He was so unused to politics. Such things left him completely out of his element. She wanted to help him, but knew she couldn’t.

The lord had pounced on his king’s hesitation, “Then it is settled. I know I am happy to see my house joined with House Stark.”

“My lord, you didn’t let me finish. We are about to go to war. A war with an impossible enemy. I may not make it through and I have no intention to leave behind a widow.”

“So you refuse my offer? Eight thousand men and a wife?”

Jon looked trapped. Then a look of anger crossed his face and he stood, his chair making a harsh scraping noise that echoed across the hall. “You have been a generous host, Lord Manderly, but I have lost my appetite. Excuse me.”

Daenerys let out a breath. It wasn’t how she would have handled that. Manderly could take offense, but it reminded her of how Jon had reacted to her in their first meeting. His focus was so singular that he never seemed to notice or care about the hurt feelings he may cause in his mission.

It might get him in trouble someday. She thought of the scars on his chest. It already had, actually.
When she found her Hand alone later, he unsurprisingly had a cask of black beer. He was looking out on the harbor and the way the moon played on the water. Daenerys had to admit, it was a pretty view.

“You were right,” Daenerys said.

“Of course I was,” he agreed immediately. “What exactly was I right about?”

She smiled, leave it to him to make her smile even when she was in no mood for it. “I may end up destroying everything I worked for all these years, my entire life really, for a pretty face.”

“Oh, that.” Tyrion’s eyebrows popped up before settling on a more somber expression. “I do believe you are not giving Jon Snow enough credit. He is more than a pretty face.”

“I would burn the world to the ground to have him, Tyrion. My first reaction to his potential engagement was to kill the two lovely women I had just spent a meal with.” Because he was hers. Even though she didn’t actually have any claim to him. Her eyes darted, wetness growing there. “I cannot feel this way. Not now, not ever.”

Tyrion looked down at his nearly empty cask. “No one can control their heart, your grace. Not even you. But you must temper it with your mind. I will help you.”

“Did you expect such a duty when you became my Hand?”

“No, but at least you understand how dangerous love can be. It’s like wildfire. It must be contained least it kill us all.”

“Have you ever been in love?”

Tyrion’s face looked pained. “Yes. It ended badly. Both times.”

“Maybe that’s the only way love can end. Badly.” Daenerys noticed the sky was getting cloudier.

“Perhaps. But you’ve done impossible things before. Being happily in love while being a good queen, should be easy for you.”

Daenerys smiled again. Her thoughts shifted to being a queen. “Have you heard where the Dothraki are? Will they meet us when they are supposed to?”

“They are not the best at sending messages, your grace. But I have no reason to believe they aren’t on schedule. I can’t imagine any of them letting a ship beat them in speed. They wouldn’t stand for it.”

“No they wouldn’t,” Daenerys agreed. She watched Tyrion finish his drink. “We’re still planning on riding out tomorrow. Account for that in your drinking tonight. I don’t want to hear you complaining about your hangover tomorrow.”

Tyrion smiled, “You know me too well, your grace.”
Daenerys paced her room. She wanted to go see him, but knew it was a terrible idea. How many times had Varys warned her that spies were everywhere and even the most fortified walls had eyes and ears?

She kept thinking about his potential marriage to another woman. It made her stomach churn. She could forbid it, she knew. There was plenty of precedence for it, but was that really the kind of queen she wanted to be?

She decided she didn’t care who saw her. Didn’t care if he was still angry with her, she wanted to see Jon. She opened the door.

And found him standing there, hand posed to knock. She said nothing, letting him in and he closed the door behind him, securing the bolt.

Daenerys felt a rush of heat at the implications of the bolt.

He spoke first, “Robert Baratheon is not worth a fight. The first time I saw him, he was nothing but a disappointment to me. My father had led me to expect an impressive warrior, instead I got a half-drunk fat man.”

She responded, “A lot of my knowledge of my family came from my brother. And it was mostly wrong. I know that now. But Rhaegar was always the bright spot in my sorted family. Someone to admire amid the madness. I don’t like to hear bad things about him, even though I know some of them are probably true or at least half-true.”

“My father never actually said much about Rhaegar. It was mostly others in the household who condemned him.”

It was as though a long held breath had been exhaled and both relaxed. He kissed her softly, but pulled away before it could get deeper.

Daenerys searched his eyes. There was some lust there, almost always was when he looked at her, but she could tell that wasn’t the only reason he was here tonight. She moved out of his arms to sit at the bench near the window in her room. He took the spot next to her. It was a tight fit, but neither really minded.

“How do you keep slipping past my guards?” Daenerys asked to ease them into whatever he wanted to talk about.

Jon smirked. “I may have spoken to Grey Worm at some point. About how I may need to speak with the queen on urgent matters at odd hours, alone, and how I couldn’t afford a fight with his men each time.”

Daenerys rolled her eyes. “And what if my guards were Dothraki?”

“Then I would have asked Missandei to translate.”

“You think my advisor would help you?”

“In this, yes. She is your friend after all.”

Daenerys smiled softly thinking about the conversation she’d had one late night at Dragonstone. Missandei had told her about Grey Worm’s…talents. Then Missandei had carefully approached the topic of how her queen looked at Jon Snow. Alone with her best friend, Daenerys had confessed her attraction to the King in the North. At that time that was all she thought it was, simple lust, a
distraction, albeit a pleasant one, from her true goal – winning the Iron Throne.

Now here he was standing before her, distracting her from an even greater purpose.

Jon looked out the window and Daenerys followed his gaze. It was snowing. It was still a new sight to her and she found it to be beautiful.

Jon worried, “I hope it doesn’t keep up too long, we have to get to Winterfell. We cannot afford any delays.”

“My dragons could always clear the roads for us.”

“I’m not sure paving our way with fire would be better than the snow.”

Daenerys nodded. She let the silence fill between them. It was strangely comfortable. Then again, they both spent time constantly talking at meetings during the days despite their true natures being more introspective. Jon tugged at her, and at first Daenerys thought he’d decided to skip talking but he didn’t pull her to the bed. He brought her into his lap and wrapped his arms around her, so they could both watch the snowfall. Daenerys hadn’t felt peace in such a long time. She closed her eyes and let head drop onto his shoulder.

Jon pressed a kiss to the side of her forehead. He squeezed her a little tighter and then said, “I never pictured myself getting married. Ever since I was child who could understand planning for the future beyond wanting to be a hero in some story, I knew I was going to join the night’s watch. No wife, no children. So I didn’t daydream about what kind of woman I would marry.”

Daenerys said, “I never daydreamed about that either. I was going to marry Viserys. We were going to conquer and rule Westeros together, like our ancestors before us.” She adjusted herself within his grip. “Then he sold me to a stranger and I had one less certainty in life.”

“Wasn’t that nice? The certainty of childhood? Then you grow up and realize it’s all just a crapshoot.”

He sighed. “Did it ever bother you? Marrying your brother. I couldn’t imagine taking one of my sisters for my wife.”

“I am blood of the Valyria, we have to keep the bloodline pure. It’s why I have a connection to my dragons. Not that it matters anymore. There are no Targaryens left for me to marry. My marriage will be a political one. Wouldn’t be my first.”

“What?” Jon leaned forward to look at her in surprise.

Daenerys realized she’d never told him about her betrothal in Meereen. She did now. She ended with, “My feelings towards him waivered somewhere between dislike and complete indifference. All of his kisses and caresses were completely tepid. Like it was a chore for us both.”

Jon squeezed her in closer to him, kissing her neck. Nothing tepid about him or his affection for her. She leaned back into him. “What do you think I should do?” he asked.

She remembered when she’d asked him the same question. “I think you should hold out for a queen.” She gasped at the feel of his hands caressing up her thighs. “I may be biased though.”

He chuckled, bringing her flush against him. She could feel his erection pressing against her backside. “If only I had a proposal from a queen.”
Daenerys brought an arm around to grasp and pull at his hair. “You do know it’s what Tyrion intends to do with you, don’t you? It’s why he’s not forcing you to correct people on your title to Warden of the North. We discussed the possibility of a marriage at length on the trip to Dragonstone.” Actually Jon had been one name on a list, but Daenerys didn’t think he needed to know that. Besides, he’d always been Tyrion’s favored choice.

“Has everyone been planning my marriage but me?”

“Apparently.”

A look of concern returned to Jon’s features and he pulled away. Daenerys cursed at him for being a tease. “Wait, does that mean you brought me to Dragonstone with the intention to seduce me?”

Daenerys rolled her eyes. “No, of course not. It was to be a political match. Feelings were never supposed to enter into it. We’ve quite ruined his carefully laid plans, you know.”

Jon chuckled and kissed her again, his misgivings mostly gone. “I seem to be quite good at that, ruining other people’s plans.”

Daenerys turned around fully, her knees falling on either side of his hips. “Very true,” she agreed and kissed him fully for the first time that night.

He needed no further encouragement, his hands falling to her ass and squeezing. They stayed on the bench for a while before the groaning of the furniture began to make them both too nervous. Daenerys wasn’t sure how she’d explain away a busted bench the next morning if their rough treatment wrecked it.

Jon picked her up and her legs wrapped around his waist. Their lips stayed connected as their hips ground against each other. It was glorious.

He deposited her on the furs, pulling away long enough to remove his leathers. Daenerys undressed as well. When finished, Jon Snow got to work kissing every inch of her, making his way down her body. Daenerys bit her lips to keep her sounds to a minimum. They were no longer on a boat surrounded by supporters. She had no idea what someone might hear.

She had to put a hand over her mouth to silence herself when he started nibbling on her thighs. It got worse when his tongue licked at her folds. Her hand went down, supposedly to pull him away, but it clutched at him to stay exactly where he was once he started sucking on her clit.

Daenerys hoped her hand quieted her screams enough.

Once she saw stars and her muscles released their tension, she brought her hand away from her mouth. It wasn’t long before Jon was kissing her again.

I love you. She wanted to say then. She wanted to hold his face between her hands look deeply into his eyes and tell him the truth.

But she couldn’t do that. It wouldn’t be fair to him. They were traveling to war. Their alliance had to appear completely political. They were already too involved with one another. He didn’t need more worries to complicate everything further.

Instead she grabbed his ass and dick, guiding him inside her.

“Dany,” Jon gasped.
Daenerys wondered if that’s what Jon called her in his most private thoughts, considering he used the term of affection when they were alone, often in bed together. It was a habit he didn’t seem inclined to break despite her warning against it.

It was beginning to grow on her from his lips, but the words “Dany, please,” had been her brother’s final words, tainting the nickname for her. She had loved her brother, in a fashion, but as he knelt there, arms broken and about to murdered horribly, only one word had crossed her mind.

Weak.

Her brother, for all his talk, his abuse, had been a weak, little man. And she was a khaleesi of the Dothraki, she despised weakness. He was no dragon, she had thought. She hadn’t felt nothing as she watched him die, but she had thought, “That will never be me. I will not die kneeling and screaming. I would never allow it. My death will be on my terms. My brother is a weakness that must be purged so that I may become strong. A true dragon.”

It had terrified when she reflected on it later. That she could be so cold, so monstrous to her own kin. The only family she had ever known. But if she had been some weak girl begging for her brother’s life, she would have died beside him, so she couldn’t force herself to regret it or feel guilty about it.

If I look back, I will be lost.

“Where are you?” Jon’s question and soft touch brought her back to reality. Why was she focusing on such awful memories now? Things that happened so long ago?

She outlined his face with her hands, wanting to confess again, but she merely kissed him. “Make me forget,” she whispered.

He didn’t ask any further questions, just thrusted.

Jon slipped out of the bed as carefully as he could so as to not wake Dany. He wished he could stay with her, cradle in his arms and wake up together. But they were no longer on the boat. He shouldn’t be in her room at all and he had to sneak back to his before they were caught.

He found his pants on the floor, pulled them on and laced them up. Next the tunic when on followed by his boots. He looked out the window.

The snow hadn’t stopped. Fuck. It looked like there was a half of a foot already. Most of Jon’s life had been spent in the long summer, but he remembered winter in Winterfell. The keep had turned into a fortress. There was almost no travel.

He hoped the snow would let up before the morning. They had no time to waste. He had to get back to his people.

Finished dressing, he looked back to Daenerys on the bed. She was naturally warm, he knew. And a leg and breast peaked out from under the furs. He went over to cover her, kissing her forehead as he did so.

She stirred but didn’t wake. She didn’t look like a queen like this. She looked soft and beautiful
and he ached to join her in bed again. Not for sex, just to hold her and watch her sleep.

His heart tightened, and he backed away with a shake of his head. There was no time for this. He had a war to plan and if they were delayed here, it might mean disaster for his people. He’d sent some dragonglass up earlier to be turned into weapons, but he had the bulk of it with him now. Not to mention the fact that Daenerys’ armies needed to be armed now too. His men had been making daggers and swords, but now they needed to make long spears and arakhs. He wasn’t sure his blacksmiths would even know how to make the curved Dothraki swords, but they would have to learn.

He made his way silently to his room, but slowed when he saw the light peaking out from underneath the door. He looked down the hallway. Jon was pretty sure this was in fact his room.

He opened the door gently so that he could peak in and leave if necessary. Though if this really was the wrong room, he had no idea where he was going to sleep, as he couldn’t ask for assistance this late at night. They’d either know he’d been up to something or think him a complete idiot. Probably both.

Ser Davos sat at the small desk provided in his room, reading something. Jon entered, knowing the onion knight’s room was down the hall. He closed the door behind him and the sound made Davos look up.

“What are you doing in my room?” Jon asked.

“I should be asking why you weren’t in your room.” Jon opened his mouth but Davos raised a hand to cut him off. “Oh, I know where you were and what you were doing. Out of your bleeding mind doing that here. It was bad enough on the boat, downright dangerous here.”

Jon said nothing. He knew the man was right. Knew what he was doing was wrong. He also knew he couldn’t stop it and would probably find his way to Daenerys’ tent tomorrow night. “Why are you here though?”

“Lord Manderly is one of your strongest allies. He fought with your brother, but he mostly stayed out of the battle with Bolton, which means he has one of the biggest armies in the North right now. You can’t afford to alienate them.”

Jon sat down on his bed. “So you think I should marry one the Manderly girls?”

“I didn’t say that. I actually think you were right. You shouldn’t be looking at marriage to anyone until after the war.” Davos gave him a hard look. “Though queens don’t have bastards. If you get her pregnant…”

Davos didn’t finish the thought. Jon said, “Daenerys says she can’t have children.”

“And do you believe her?”

Jon hesitated before answering. “No. I don’t think that’s true.”

Davos look of frustration increased. “So she gets pregnant and you marry her for honor’s sake. Is that your plan?”

Jon said nothing, which was answer enough.

Davos shook his head. “Honor is not good enough. Your brother married for honor and look where it got him.”
“Robb married for love.”

“Love is an even worse reason for a king to marry. The north remembers, Jon Snow. The lords remember how the last king lost his crown along with his head.”

Jon’s thoughts stopped. Had Robb lost his head? He didn’t know the details of his brother’s death. Never wanted to know them. He still didn’t. “I know that. But then we’re back to marrying one of the Manderly girls.”

“This wouldn’t be the first engagement for the Manderly girls. And as soon as the lords find out you’ve bent the knee, I suspect he’ll take his marriage offer away again.”

“So do you want me to say yes, knowing they’ll take it away later, when I’m just a bastard again?”

“No, that’s too risky. You can’t be trapped by your word later.”

“So what is it you want me to do?”

“I want you to play the game. You can’t marry one of them, but you have a brother. A trueborn son of Ned Stark.”

Jon stood. “From Sansa’s notes, Bran is in no shape to marry anyone. Besides, I can’t sell my family off like that.”

“That’s what being a lord, being a king is. You are in the great game now, Jon Snow. You have to play it or you will be crushed by it.”

Jon saw the emotion in Davos’ eyes. Stannis Baratheon hadn’t really played the game, or at least not well. He knew that’s where this talk was coming from. His friend didn’t want to see him die. Jon sighed, “Who knew fighting White Walkers was going to be the easy part of being king?”

Davos chuckled. “Fighting’s usually the easiest for men like you and Stannis. Neither of you even flinched at making the tough calls. But ruling is more than that, you also have to be a politician.”

“Father always said that a good politician cannot be a good man.”

“That’s probably true. It’s also probably why he failed in King’s Landing.”

Jon’s eyes closed as he let his fall back to face the ceiling. “I don’t need to be constantly reminded of my family’s failings and deaths.”

“I’m asking you to learn from their mistakes. You are a good king, Jon. Perhaps the best. It’s why I serve you as best I can. And that means pointing out hard truths to you. Northmen haven’t trusted southern rulers since the deaths of Rickard and Brandon Stark. And as their king, you’re bringing one to them. A queen you’ve bent the knee to. It’s necessary, I know, but it may prove too bitter for them to swallow. You need to somehow add some sweetness to it. You forced the men of the night’s watch to let wildlings past the wall. Half understood your intentions and accepted your decision, the other half…”

The rest was left unsaid, the uncomfortable moment standing for a moment before Davos finished, “You have to learn from your mistakes as well, your grace.”

Jon thought for a moment, processing his advisor’s words. They were good and the old knight was right. But Jon couldn’t see a solution. “What do you propose I do? Throw a feast and a tourney? There’s no time for that and we can’t afford the resources now that winter is here. How do I give
them something sweet when the dead march towards us?"

“I’m just an old smuggler. I don’t know the answers to such questions.”

Jon sat down on his bed again. “Neither do I,” he confessed. “I’m just a bastard.”

Davos moved his chair to sit across from Jon. “You are more than that. You’ve accomplished more in your short life than most men do in their long lives. You’ve done great and impossible things. You can handle a few stubborn lords.”

Jon looked at Davos, grateful for the man. Stannis was a lucky man to have this knight’s complete loyalty. Jon looked over to the fire still burning in the lamp, “What were you reading?”

Davos looked embarrassed, “Nothing important. Just wanted to practice.”

Jon got up and looked at the cover. He looked back, “The tales about the dragon riders were always my favorite too.” Jon looked out the window, “I still can’t believe they exist. I even got to touch one.”

“When did you do this?” Davos stood.

“Back at Dragonstone, after Daenerys returned from her battle with the Lannisters.”

Davos looked disapproving. “She could have burned you alive, you know.”

“Aye,” Jon agreed. His mind turned back to the issue at hand. “I can’t change the world, not now anyway. The dead are coming, and we must stand together to fight them. We can’t afford old grudges and politics and backstabbing and even stubbornness to get in the way of that. I don’t need them to fight with me because I am their king. I need to be their king so that they can fight what’s coming.”

Davos nodded. Jon continued, “So if I can’t force them and I can’t sweeten it for them, I may have to terrify them.”

Davos looked confused, “What did you have in mind?”

The snow hadn’t stopped and Jon cursed its bad timing. He sent some men out to assess the roads. They hadn’t returned yet, which Jon took as a bad sign. They had to leave today. He’d been delayed for far too long.

He had much to do, but with last night’s conversation in mind, he accepted his host’s invitation to breakfast. Jon was the last to arrive and surprised to find his spot was still the one of honor despite what had happened last night.

Wyman greeted him warmly, making Jon wonder if it had all been a bad dream, “Your majesty. Sit, eat. I am sorry to see that the weather may delay your party but I am happy for the extra time in my king’s company.”

Jon gave the lord a curt nod and took his seat. His eyes immediately to silver hair and saw Daenerys whispering with her Hand.
“Have you given more thought to my offer, your grace?” Wyman asked.

So it hadn’t been a bad dream after all. “My answer remains the same as last night, Sir Manderly. Marriage is a luxury I cannot afford until our fight against the dead is won.”

Manderly shook his head but said nothing. Jon hoped that would be the end of it, but he doubted it.

The fat lord turned his attention to the Dragon Queen. “My lady, we have prepared a beautiful carriage for your trip north. My son can escort when you’ve finished eating.”

“Thank you, my lord, but I am a khaleesi, a queen of horselords. I do not ride in carriages.”

Jon didn’t miss the sour look on Tyrion and Jorah’s faces. They had been arguing for her to stay hidden in a carriage for her safety. She had made the compromise of a cloak hiding her hair. Neither man had been satisfied with her solution, but you could only fight a queen so much once her mind was made up.

Lord Manderly almost looked impressed at Daenerys’ response, which pleased Jon to see. The lord answered, “Do you have any preference of horse?”

“A white one if you have it,” Daenerys answered.

“We will see it done.”

The meal was uneventful. When it ended, Wylis Wanderly escorted Daenerys to the stables. Jon rose, intending to check the roads for himself and hopefully prepare to depart White Harbor, but Wyman stopped him, “Your majesty, a moment?”

Jon nodded and sat to speak with his lord. Wyman said nothing until the room had cleared leaving them alone. Jon grew uncomfortable in the silence.

The Lord said, “I’m an old man, your grace. I fought in Robert’s Rebellion, I fought in the War for Five Kings, and honestly, I’m too tired for another war, even one as important as the one you claim awaits us.”

Jon opened to protest, to once again argue the Long Night was real and here, but Manderly stopped him with a raised hand, “I believe you well enough. You are too much your father’s son, like your brother before you. I worry about that sometimes, you know.”

Jon didn’t react to that, not sure how this man expected him to. Manderly continued, “When you get to my age, boy, you no longer have much left. My greatest joy in life was riding horses, which I no longer can do. I loved my wife, a rarity in a noble’s life, but she’s gone, and I’ve buried a son. There’s not much left for me but my death. But before I go, I want to see my family live on, and live well. Do you understand?”

Before Jon could answer, the Lord answered for him, “Of course you don’t. You are a young man. Haven’t even fathered a child yet. You couldn’t understand the ravages of old age, not yet. I tell you true, young king. I am happy the snow may keep you here longer. Because I want you to marry one of my granddaughters. I want to know I did one thing right, marrying one of my girls to a Stark boy.”

Jon shook his head, “I cannot do that, my lord. Nor can I promise that I will.”

Manderly nodded. “It’s smart, really, for you to say that. Your brother promised a marriage and then broke that promise, to all of our grief. I can respect you for not making the same mistake.”
Manderly leaned in and Jon could smell the fish the lord had just consumed. “What I cannot respect is you picking the foreign invader over a good northern wife.”

Jon tried to protest, but Manderly stopped him again. “Don’t bother denying it. You may not be promised to her yet, but I do know that you visited her rooms late last night and stayed too long for mere conversation.”

Jon paled. He thought he’d been careful.

“Don’t look so worried, your grace. No one else knows. I have no desire to crown a new King in the North, which is what my impulsive son would want to do and lead the rest of the northern lords in his support. He probably would even succeed. But we don’t need a new king. You need to be a better king.”

Jon swallowed, trying to contain the anger that came easily to him. “And I would do that by marrying Wynafred or Wyalla?”

Lord Manderly leaned back. “Prove to me that you are loyal to the north and not some foreign queen.”

Jon stood, “I am sorry to disappoint you, Lord Manderly, but your ploy here won’t work. I have learned from my brother’s mistakes and I will not be blackmailed into a marriage.”

“Then expect to lose your title by the time you reach Winterfell, your majesty.”

Jon smiled, an empty, cruel one. “My lord, I’ve already bent the knee to Daenerys Targaryen. I have already lost my title.”

Manderly looked shocked by Jon’s confession. “She’s seduced you.”

“No. That’s not what happened. She saved my life beyond the wall, sacrificed one of her children to do so. How could I not kneel to a queen like that? A true protector of the realm.” Jon shook his head. “I know I’m probably handling this all wrong, but it doesn’t matter, what matters is that the dead are coming and we must stop them.”

Manderly’s expression hardened, “Then you will do it without the support of House Manderly.”

Jon wasn’t surprised, but he let his anger free at the threat. “I’m not sure how much the support of your house means, considering you served that madman who stole Winterfell. Roose murdered my brother along with your son to gain my home and you did nothing. You just let him give my sister to his bastard, let him rape her, let them all do unspeakable things. Wait, no, you did do something, you pledged your support to House Bolton.”

Manderly defended himself, “The Starks were gone, a dead house. I am loyal to Winterfell and the North. I will serve them as best I can. Even if that means treating with monsters.”

Manderly processed Jon’s words slowly, taking them in and turning them over. He looked at Jon with narrowed eyes, “I may have underestimated you, White Wolf.” He stood, extending his arm. “I pledge my house to you, King Snow. My men will fight with you. Wylis will command them.”
Jon clasped the other man’s forearm to seal their words. Jon remembered what Davos had advised the night before and added, “When I do marry, I will keep your granddaughters in mind.”

The lord smiled, but Jon could tell he didn’t believe him. “If you truly have already bent the knee to the Dragon Queen, I may not want them marry a bastard who used to be King in the North.”


The raven had looked like any other, but the news it carried made it a symbol of doom.

The snow had finally stopped, but Jon knew they’d still be delayed by a day because of the terrible road conditions. He hated it, but then Lord Manderly’s men needed time to prepare for their departure north and this meant they may be able to ride with them.

Jon had received the message as he made his way to Daenerys and her small council. He wanted to see if the Dothraki had been delayed by the weather as well and if this changed their plans.

He read the message as he walked towards them, but the contents made him stopped in his tracks.

Tyrion had noticed. “What is the message?”

All eyes turn to Jon, he can barely speak, dropping the parchment in the fresh snow, ruining the terrible words.

“We’re too late. The wall has been breached. The white walkers are in the north.”
Sitting in the pub, Jaime realized he had not thought this plan through. It seemed a common theme in his life. He rarely measured out all of the consequences of his actions; he merely acted and hoped for the best.

In his defense, he was still alive, so it wasn’t that bad of a strategy.

He didn’t even have a firm direction when he’d left King’s Landing. He had sat outside the gates for several minutes wondering which direction to take. The thought of Cersei changing her mind and dropping wildfire on him made him move. It didn’t matter where he went. He just had to go north. The rest would sort itself out.

Jaime sighed. It was going to be a long trip, and a dangerous one. All of the wars had done nothing to put a stop to all the bandits on the Kingsroad. It was as bad as it had ever been, and he was now just one man with one hand. An easy target.

Jaime shook his head. Wasn’t that the way of the world? Kings and queens fought, smallfolk suffered and died, and the scavengers just kept on. He took another took another drink of ale, face scrunching at the taste. He wasn’t like his sister or brother, he’d never enjoyed the drink.

“You’re a real asshole. You know that?”

Jaime couldn’t believe what he’d heard at first. That familiar voice. It wasn’t until the sellsword sat across from him, the knight allowed himself to smile. Bronn stole the drink from his hand. “All we been through and I don’t even get a good bye?”

Jaime shrugged. “I’m headed north to face an enemy we might not beat for the sake of my honor. Figured it wouldn’t be your thing.”

“You still owe me,” Bronn said, drinking Jaime’s ale.

“Why didn’t you ask for it from Cersei? She can actually give you your castle.”

“Cersei’s a cunt. I can’t even be in the same room with her, let alone serve her. Besides, I was on that battlefield too. My money’s on the queen with dragons.”

Jaime shook his head. The Dragon Queen might have his head as soon as he arrived at Winterfell. Or even if Tyrion convinced the Targaryen to let him live, the Starks might kill him. “I can’t…”

Bronn put down the empty mug, signaling the server. “No shit. But your brother might be able to.” Two fresh mugs appeared before them. Jaime paid the woman. Bronn took both. “He paid better than you anyway.”

Jaime wanted to protest, but he stayed quiet. “So what is your plan here, exactly?” Bronn asked.

Jaime shrugged. “I’m still figuring it out.”

“Seven hells,” Bronn cursed. “You left King’s Landing with a pissed off queen behind you to head north where an army of dead men is coming to kill us all. And you have no plan?” Bronn took a drink. “Fuck.”

Jaime looked closer at Bronn. “I figured you would have found a ship and gotten the hell out of
Westeros when you learned what’s sitting behind the wall.”

Bronn shrugged. “That’s always an option. But I didn’t get to see the living dead man. I’m curious to see another thing that was supposed to be just a legend. Stories about all the impossible things you’ve faced make for better bar stories. Like the time I single-handedly took down a dragon.”

Jaime smirked. “The dragon that nearly killed us both shortly after and flew away without any appearance of actual harm done to it?”

“Well that would be a shit ending. I’m going to give it a better one.”

Jaime shook his head at the thought of the ridiculous tale his friend would turn that battle into. Then the knight’s thoughts turned to the terrifying sight of the thing that Jon Snow had brought from the North to the Dragonpit. He nearly shivered. And the Dragon Queen claimed there were at least 100,000 of those things coming towards them.

How could Cersei not understand? How could she not see that her throne wasn’t as important as the coming war? When had she lost her mind? Jaime shook his head. Thinking of Cersei didn’t help him. He’d loved her for his entire life, turning his back on her felt so wrong even though he knew it had been the right thing to do.

He still missed her.

He watched Bronn drink and thought about what he should do. Two men wasn’t enough. He was supposed to be coming with an army. But he didn’t have an army, Cersei did. Then he remembered something.

“How many men did we leave at Riverrun?”

“What?” Bronn set down his second mug, having finished the first.

“We had an army at Riverrun, how many did we leave behind before marching to the Reach?”

Bronn shrugged. “Couple hundred maybe.”

Jaime stood. “Come on. We have to get to Riverrun before they receive any messages.”

Bronn looked skeptical. “And how do you think we’re going to manage to do that? No horse is faster than a raven.”

“Cersei isn’t a military commander, and the closest thing she’s got to one right now is that thing that used to be the Mountain. I don’t think she’ll remember the Lannister men at Riverrun right away. If we get there first, the men will probably take my orders at my word. Better to show up with a part of an army than none at all.”

Bronn finished his ale in one go. “Let’s get moving then.”

As if the gods knew just how fucked they were now, they decided to toy with them by starting up the snow again not long after Jon Snow’s announcement. It got thicker and now the wind kicked up causing a complete whiteout, leaving the army stranded at White Harbor. Tyrion could see how much this agitated the King in the North. He was pacing around like a caged wolf.
It would be amusing if not so annoying. The ravens had been sent informing the people in Winterfell of the delay.

Tyrion hoped the delay wouldn’t be too much. They were racing even more against the clock now.

How in the seven hells had the wall fallen? The message hadn’t said, but Tyrion knew powerful magic kept the wall intact and protected them all against the dead.

The answer had to be the Night King’s own magic somehow defeated the Wall, but why now?

Honestly, Tyrion was too terrified to think on it too much. “I guess this means all our plans are useless now.”

Jon gave him a glare as cold as the winter itself, but Tyrion continued, “We need a new strategy.”

The King in the North stopped pacing. He closed his eyes, looking up. “Aye,” he agreed. He looked at Tyrion. “You did offer to figure out what to do about my walking dead men.”

Tyrion’s eyes crinkled at the joke, they were so rare from the dour Stark. “In exchange for you figuring out what to do about my missing ships and murdered allies, which you did not do.”

“What are you two talking about?” Daenerys interrupted. “How did the wall even fall? I thought it was impossible.”

“It is,” Jon said. “It’s not just the size, the wall was constructed with old magic. It cannot fall.”

Tyrion shared his previous thought, “Unless the Night King has magic of his own, which I think it’s safe to assume he does, what with the raising the dead and all.”

“Fuck,” Jon said, and he was back to pacing.

Tyrion noticed that they were gaining the attention of soldiers and commonfolk. “Perhaps we should talk about this inside? Privately.”

Daenerys noticed what Tyrion had and agreed. She walked beside the king, speaking to him softly. Tyrion could see from Jon’s clinched fist he was physically restraining himself from touching the queen. From the look of Daenerys’ fidgeting, she was having the same problem.

Tyrion sighed. All he’d wanted was a good ruler to follow and advise. He hadn’t signed up for watching a queen and king who should know better acting like love-struck teenagers. Varys leaned over, interrupting his thoughts, “If you keep glaring at the two of them like that, people are going to start telling tales.”

Tyrion’s eyebrow raised, “Oh. And have your little birds been telling you such stories?”

Varys did his best impression of innocent. “Nothing yet, but there are some who believe that you are besotted by the queen as Ser Jorah.”

Tyrion scoffed. “I don’t think Jon Snow is as in love with her as Ser Jorah is.”

Varys looked at the pair in front of them, who still weren’t touching, but were whispering to each other in a too familiar manner. “I may take you on that bet.”

“What is your wager?” Tyrion asked.

Varys scoffed. “Nothing because you have nothing I could possibly want.”
“Oh come on, a case of Dornish wine against…” Tyrion thought for a moment. “Shit, I don’t know what you want.”

“Precisely.”

“Wait,” Tyrion thought of something. “How about my support?”

Varys stopped walking, no one else in their party seemed to notice, so Tyrion stopped too. “What do you mean?”

“We’re going to have a lot of these small council meetings in our future and I promise my support on something you want, no questions asked. I will use all of my powers of persuasion on the queen,” Tyrion paused before adding, “or king to convince them you’re right. Even if I think you’re nuts.”

“Done,” Varys removed one of his hands from his sleeves. Tyrion eyed the hand suspiciously wondering if he’d been duped. Varys seemed to agree to those terms far too quickly. But Tyrion set aside his unease and took the eunuch’s hand.

They began walking again. “How do we settle our bet?” Varys asked.

Tyrion considered it for a moment. He studied the lovers now distantly ahead of them. They still weren’t touching, but standing closer to one another than was proper. “Perhaps if Jon Snow does something suicidal to save his queen.”

“He’s already done that once.”

“Only after Ser Jorah though.”

Varys looked uncomfortable. “I think it may need to be something else. Jon Snow is a man of the north. He will show his love with his actions. His is a man of honor and duty. Perhaps if he sacrifices his honor and duty for her sake?”

Tyrion nodded in agreement. It seemed unlikely that Jon Snow would do such a thing.

Inside of Manderly’s war room, they stood over a map of the North. The king had Davos on his right and the two Manderly men on his left. Daenerys was surrounded by her small council, but looked to Jon for direction.

The king pointed to Eastwatch. “This is where the dead entered. The Night King will start attacking Last Hearth and the Dreadfort before taking Winterfell. We had planned to fortify these keeps with our northern men and Lannister allies. The Unsullied would go to the wall and the Dothraki would stay around Winterfell. We may need the Dothraki to reinforce the keeps instead. They may be the only ones who will have the speed to do it.”

“Will my horselords be able to stop the dead men? They don’t even have proper weapons yet.” Daenerys said. She looked worried to Tyrion. “I will not sacrifice my men needlessly.”

“I have to protect my people, your grace. I have men in Last Hearth and the Dreadfort. I will not abandon them.”
She nodded, studying the map.

“How fortified are those keeps?” Tyrion asked.

Jon didn’t seem to understand the question. “They are as fortified as can be expected. They are strong.”

“Perhaps we should evacuate them. Empty buildings are no use to the Night King. Winterfell may be our best fortress.”

“We cannot hide behind walls, my lord. The Night King just destroyed the only one that could have stopped him. We must fight him. We have no choice now. Winterfell is still rebuilding. We will need stop him before then if possible.”

Tyrion nodded, unable to argue with the king’s logic. He turned his mind back to the map before them. He spent his life concocting clever plans, why did they abandon in face of the most important enemy he’d ever faced? His mind couldn’t get past his terror to think of a way defeat the dead army they faced. Battles resulted in losses, but in this battle their losses would only add to their enemies’ ranks. They could afford no dead and no battle could be won without some dead. The problem seemed to loop and Tyrion couldn’t find a way out of it. If they fought, some would die and those dead would join the other army. It was a numbers game and the numbers were against them.

Jon was talking again, “We need to figure out a way to kill the White Walkers. They stay back during the battles, but if we kill them, the wights they control fall as well. They must be our focus.”

“My dragons can take care of that. They can fly over battle lines,” Daenerys said.

“No,” Tyrion said. “We cannot risk your dragons, your grace.”

“How do you plan to win this fight without dragons, my lord? It’s the only way we can win that I can see,” said Lord Manderly. “We should be sending them into every battle.”

“If we lose our dragons, we lose our best weapons. We now know that the Night King can kill dragons. We must use them carefully.”

“Lord Tyrion is right.” The King in the North agreed. “We must be careful in using the dragons. We cannot afford to lose them.”

The younger Manderly looked at the map and shook his head. “I don’t see how we can possibly win this fight. We should just start building ships and leave Westeros behind.”

His father whacked his head. “I will not have my family called cravens. We stay, we fight.”

Tyrion asked, “Where would be the best place to fight? If we can choose the battleground, we will have an advantage. The Night King and his generals may be cunning, but their forces are mindless. Perhaps we can use that against them.”

Jon nodded. He pointed at a spot that appeared to be two mountains. “There. That pass would be the easiest place to defend. Their numbers wouldn’t matter as much. But then our men would have no way of targeting the ones we really need to stop. The Night King would just send waves of his forces until we tire. We cannot fight forever. His forces can.” Tyrion could hear the frustration creeping into the king’s voice, but to the young man’s credit, he showed none of it on his face. It only held a steely determination.
“We need the maesters,” Daenerys said to the surprise of everyone else. Her eyes met the king’s. “We saw the paintings in the caves. The first men faced the dead, and the first men defeated them. How? They didn’t have dragons. My family didn’t come with them until a thousand years later. We need knowledge to win this fight.” Tyrion felt pride at his queen’s words. Unlike his sister, Daenerys understood that wisdom could be a better tool than just power and violence.

The king nodded with her. “Send ravens to the Citadel. Command them to search through their books for any mention of the White Walkers and the Night King.”

“The Citadel won’t listen to the command of the King in the North,” one of Wanderly’s men protested.

“If the Citadel disobeys me they risk the wrath not just the King in the North but the two southern queens as well. We are all in this fight together.” Jon thought for another moment. “Address it to Samwell Tarly. He’s a good friend. He’ll listen.”

Tyrion glanced at Daenerys. She glanced back at him at the name Tarly. Tyrion guessed the King in the North didn’t know his beloved queen had killed his good friend’s family with dragonfire. Tyrion sensed it could be a problem in the future, but there was no use in worrying about it now.

Jon Snow looked to Lord Manderly. “When do you think the roads will be passable again?”

“Hard to say, your grace,” Manderly shrugged. His rolls of fat bunching together. “The snow appears to be slowing, but the wind is still strong.”

“Prepare your men. We march as soon as we are able to leave.”

The two lords nodded and with a slight bow left to tend to their men. Davos followed them after a look from his king. Varys bowed to his queen before leaving to attending some matters Tyrion suspected he’d rather not know about. Grey Worm also left to see his men, with Missandei following. Only Tyrion, Jorah remained with the king and queen. Jon Snow continued to brood over the table. The queen moved to stand next to him. Her hand moved to rest next to his. “We will defeat the Night King and his army, Jon.”

Jon. Tyrion had never heard the queen refer to the king so informally. This confirmed her feelings for him more than their time spent in her chambers on the boat.

“Nothing stands between the Night King and my people. He could be marching towards my family as we speak, and I’m stuck here. I’ve only just got them back. I haven’t even seen Arya and Bran yet.”

“You will,” she assured him. “You will see them again and you will protect them from what’s coming. You will save your people, Jon Snow. We will save them together.”

The king’s hand moved to clasp the queen’s. He straightened and turned to her to say something. But whatever it was died in his throat as he just seemed to notice that they weren’t alone. Jon dropped Daenerys’ hand. “Lord Tyrion, you’ve read many books. Have you ever read anything about how the last fight was won?”

Tyrion rolled his eyes. “Yes, I’ve had the answers all along, and I’ve just sat on them for my own amusement.”

Jon’s look turned cross. He went back to brooding at the map. Daenerys sighed and turned to her Queensguard, “Ser Jorah, I would like to see how my children are faring this winter storm. Escort me beyond the gate.”
“Your grace,” Jorah bowed. They left, leaving Tyrion alone with the King in the North.

Tyrion thought this as good as an opportunity as he was going to get to address his concerns with the king. “We need to talk.”

The words had made Jon’s spine stiffen. He stood again, looking at the Queen’s Hand rather than the map. He opened his mouth to say something, but Tyrion put up a hand to silence him. Jon knew he was still a king and could speak anyway, but he allowed Tyrion to talk, “I need to speak with you, and I need you to just listen. Don’t respond, don’t tell me to get on with it, just listen to everything I have to say to you. Okay?”

Jon swallowed the annoyed response on his tongue, clenching his jaw shut and nodded.

Tyrion studied the young king for a moment before beginning. “Before we left Meereen, Daenerys and I had a serious, long talk about Westeros. Many talks actually, but this one was about the need for marriage alliances. You see, she had a lover, and I asked her to leave him behind.”

Jon’s expression tightened. He knew she hadn’t been some maid, guessed she’d had more men than just her husband, but he really didn’t need to hear all about it. He had never asked Daenerys about it for a reason.

“She did, like a good queen would, and I began to examine our prospects for a potential marriage. The best option had been Loras Tyrell. They were allied with the Lannisters, sure, but they had been loyalists to the Targaryens in the rebellion, and in reality they were allied with Tywin Lannister. Cersei was never going to marry Loras without our father enforcing it. We would have stolen her best ally, and I do believe it would have been a good marriage. There never would have been love, but in public Loras would have been devoted and in private neither would begrudge the other their lovers. Not a perfect marriage, but a good one overall.”

“Then Cersei blew up the Sept and any of those plans with it. So I looked at our other allies. A Dornish prince might not be bad. Rhaegar had married a Dornish princess for a reason. But after Myrcella’s death…” Tyrion paused, a tight expression on his face. “There was no hope of peace between them and the Lannisters, not in this generation. Marriages are supposed to make tenuous alliances permanent. Their loyalty to our queen would never be in question, even if it was just spite and hatred holding it together.”

“Next were the Greyjoys.” Tyrion sighed. “Theon might not have been a bad choice before he lost his dick, but now he would be no good. She had already rejected a potential proposal from Euron.” Tyrion stopped, then added, “Wisely, I might add. He was as likely to kill her after he bedded her as to deliver his ships when needed. Cersei can have him.”

“So I looked to those who weren’t allies. Jaime might have worked if it wasn’t for my certainty that Cersei would never allow it. Besides, I’m not sure Jaime would have gone for it either. A pity, it would have stopped the war before it started, and we’d have more men to stand against the Night King.”

Jon shifted, growing bored. When was the Hand going to get to the point? He had real matters to attend to rather than discussing his queen’s potential engagement.

“There were some other minor noble houses too, but I didn’t really think much about them.
Daenerys could only marry once, and I wasn’t going to waste it on a Tarly.”

The name made Jon think of his friend. He nearly chuckled at the thought of Samwell married to Dany. She would have eaten him alive.

“It was on the boats crossing the narrow sea I first learned of the new King in the North. I didn’t know it was you yet, but the north has always been an important part of the Seven Kingdoms and we would have to bring its new king to heel sooner rather than later.”

Jon bristled. “Bring us to heel, like a dog?”

“More like a wolf. The north is always going to be a little wild.” Tyrion met Jon’s eyes. “Imagine my surprise when I learned it was Ned Stark’s bastard who carried the title of King in the North. That short-tempered boy I met all those years ago.” Tyrion poured himself some wine and sat next to Jon, swirling the red liquid in its glass. “Then I thought on it. You were a good fighter, clever enough to heed good advice when you got it, and totally Ned Stark’s honorable, good son, not a bad choice for a king.” Tyrion looked at Jon again. “Not bad at all.”

The dwarf took a drink before continuing. “Not a bad choice for a husband either.”

Jon’s eyes widened. He had guessed that’s where this conversation had to be heading, but he so rarely got what he wanted he couldn’t help but be surprised when it happened.

“It was almost perfect. The north is an important ally, by marrying their king, Daenerys would subdue it while allowing them to keep their northern ruler. Northerners are a fickle bunch when it comes southern rulers, it made sense to have a permanent alliance. As for the marriage itself,” Tyrion shrugged taking another drink. “You were a good man and she’s a great woman. Both young and attractive. I imagined it playing out much like Eddard Stark and Catelyn Tully’s marriage. Political at first, but growing into true love. And I was happy for it as I liked you both.”

Tyrion took another drink. “Then you two had to fuck up all my careful planning.”

“We could still enter a marriage alliance,” Jon said, feeling like he was stating the obvious. How was a love an obstacle to marriage?

“It was supposed to take years for the two of you to fall in love, not months. Now we’re entering a war with a huge liability.”

“Are you calling love a liability?”

“Yes,” Tyrion replied bluntly. “You two will lead us in this fight, and you will make irrational, emotional choices regarding each other. It could destroy us all.” Jon’s spine stiffened. He didn’t want to hear this, even if he’d had similar thoughts. Because it echoed his own fears. “She’s already sacrificed a dragon for you, and that was before you were sleeping together.”

Jon let his temper go, “I know my duty to my people. I am the fucking shield of the realm, the blade in the night, and I made peace with my possible death a long time ago. I will do what needs to be done.”

“What if what needs to be done is she needs to die?”

Jon lost his breath for an instant. He would never let that happen, he’d already had one love die in his arms, it wouldn’t happen again. He hesitated to answer though, knowing it wouldn’t be what Tyrion wanted to hear. Jon didn’t want to lie, but he couldn’t think of a way to sidestep and soften the truth.
The Hand didn’t wait for his response though, “That. That hesitation is what worries me. Both you and the queen know your duty and follow it admirably. It’s why I follow her. But…”

Jon interrupted him, “Love is the death of duty.”

Tyrion seemed surprised by the king’s insight. “Exactly.”

They sat in silence for a moment, Tyrion drinking and Jon wishing he liked wine better so he could join him. Surprisingly, Jon broke the quiet. “So basically all of that talking was just your way of complaining to me that your clever plan worked too well.”

Tyrion chuckled. “I suppose it was.”

Jon stood, bringing his furs in closer. “I can’t stop loving her. If I could I never would have fallen for her in the first place. I know it’s bad timing. I know it could end in disaster for all of us. But the Long Night is coming, and we may not be able to stop it. So I will take what happiness I can before then. I have to. If I die, I die. But at least I lived.”

“It’s really annoying that you make it hard to hate you.”

Jon smiled. “Yeah.” Jon looked to the door but didn’t leave yet. “Whatever politics need to happen, I’ll leave that to you, and go along with whatever you figure out.”

“I need you to remain King in the North for now. I know it’ll hurt your stupid honor, but I’m not asking you to lie. I just don’t need to deal with northern lords deciding to name a new king just before we all enter into the Great War. We need one army, fighting under one banner.”

Jon nodded, it was why he’d accepted the crown in the first place. He went to leave, but Tyrion stopped him, standing again, “One more thing, your name, Snow. Our queen cannot put a bastard on the throne beside her.”

Jon breathed out. It always came back to that didn’t it? What he wasn’t allowed because his father hadn’t been married to his mother. “You want me to take the name Stark?” Jon didn’t know why he hesitated. Hadn’t he wanted that his entire life?

“Actually, I wanted to float an idea by you.” Jon didn’t bother hiding his confusion. “The queen has the name. I wondered if you would take hers. Become Jon Snow, King of Westeros, King in the North, former Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, The White Wolf, Blood of the First Men, and whatever other titles you want or earn in the coming fight, of House Targaryen.”

Jon’s eyebrow lifted and he felt the anger grow in his chest. “You want me to take the Targaryen name?” His father had fought to overthrow the Targaryens. It was bad enough that he now bowed to one. To join their house – it would be the ultimate betrayal.

“Yes.” Jon looked away. “I know it’s not how it’s usually done.” Tyrion continued, “I know it may hurt your pride. But Snow isn’t a family name. She cannot be Daenerys Stormborn of the House of Snow or even House Stark, not to rule all of Westeros. If you have children, what name should they have but Targaryen? It would make everything simpler.”

It all made sense. But when did Tyrion ever make an argument not based on logic? Jon still didn’t know if he could stomach it. He nodded tightly. “I’ll think on it.”
Arya practiced in the yard with Needle. She supposed she should help with the training, but most of the men and boys didn’t take her seriously, and the women and girls were mostly useless with swords. It held no real appeal to her and Sansa hadn’t ordered it, so Arya just left it alone.

Sansa. Arya’s relationship with Sansa was different from when they were kids. There had always been a tension between them, they fought more often than not, but Arya had missed Sansa in her travels. Would have given anything to be with her big sister again.

And for a brief moment in their reunion, it had been nice. But then, the tension was back. Worse than before since it was no longer girls playing games but women who’d survived wars. Sansa had ultimately seen the truth by asking Bran, but it didn’t change the fact she’d suspected Arya of treason. Arya thought if either of them was more likely to turn against the family it was her cold sister.

She knew Sansa thought she would be a better ruler than Jon.

Arya tried to let the thought go. Tried to remember her father’s words, “The lone wolf dies, only the pack survives.” But then Arya had done pretty good for a lone wolf. She thrust her sword forward and danced around, dodging an imaginary attack.

But they had all changed in their time apart, and not all for the better. Bran was so different. He didn’t even seem connected to the world anymore. It was as if being the three-eyed raven had swallowed up all of the fearless boy Arya remembered. Now Bran was just a husk that hosted some mystical entity.

It made Arya worry about seeing Jon again. How had he’d changed? Sansa had told her some things, about Jon having been elected the Lord Commander and that he’d seen walking dead men beyond the wall, but was he different too? Would he still be the same brother she’d known and loved? Would he still love her despite how different she was now?

She just wanted to see him again.

Though she didn’t envy his first days back. Sansa was furious with him and the northern lords were grumbling more each day. Arya was sure Jon had his reasons for bending the knee to the Dragon Queen. Arya knew a little about the Dragon Queen, whose name in Braavos had been spoken with a certain amount of awe. The priestesses had declared her a messiah and the bankers had grumbled about lost profits because of the conqueror. But none of those stories had interested Arya as much as the one’s about the queen’s three living dragons.

That thought made Arya pause in her practice. Jon was bringing dragons with him. Real dragons.

She was almost just as excited to see them as she was her brother. She had spent her girlhood dreaming of riding a dragon into battle like Aegon’s sisterwives or any of the other legendary dragonriders. And she was about to see a real dragon. She wondered if there was any chance she could ride one.

It would be a dream come true. Arya hoped Jon had secured a strong enough alliance that he could make that happen for her.

Across the courtyard, Arya saw a sight she never thought to see again. She sheathed Needle as a man walked towards her, his ugly face looking just as disdainful as ever.

The Hound looked her over, “You’re still a tiny thing. Have you grown at all since I last saw ya?”
Part of her wanted to slit the hound’s throat as soon as she saw him, if just to prove the waif wrong. But a much bigger part of her wanted to speak to him, show off her new skills, and maybe even hug him. She had thought that part of her dead by now, but he had helped her when she needed it. She had grown to care for him.

Even if he was still a piece of shit excuse for a human being.

Arya returned his sneer. “The most dangerous threat is the one that goes unseen. I could kill you now without any trouble.”

The Hound barked out a laugh. “You could never hurt me.”

But much to her surprise, Arya found that the waif had been right. She had no desire to kill the Hound now that he stood before her again. Not that he needed to know that. She began to circle around him and said, “Seems an odd thing for you to say considering the last time I saw you Brienne of Tarth had skewered you and I left you for dead.”

The Hound looked even more displeased at the reminder of his defeat. “She says you don’t need protecting anymore.”

“She’s right,” Arya pointed Needle at the Hound in a flash. “Care to see and be defeated by another woman?”

The Hound rolled his eyes. “I don’t fight fucking children.”

“I am no child; I am no one.”

The Hound’s eyes narrowed. “Wha’d you say?”

Arya smirked. “You heard me.”

“Dangerous game you’re playing little girl. Facestealers are no joke.”

“No, we’re not.” She let him digest her words for a moment before sheathing her sword again. “Lucky for you I don’t want to add such an ugly face as yours to my collection.”

“Fucking Starks. You’re as bad as the shits north of the Wall. Never dying even when you should.”

“Why are you here?”

The Hound looked like he wasn’t going to answer her for a moment. “Got nowhere else to be.”

Arya didn’t believe him, saw the lie, but decided to leave it be for now.

The rest of the day went to preparing troops, packing provisions for the armies in Winterfell, sending orders, and a thousand other tasks that had to be done. There had been no feast, and Jon had taken supper in his chamber, relishing a few moments alone.

He tried to stay away that night. It wasn’t safe here, Lord Manderly had shown him that. But his thoughts kept him awake. Strategies on how to defeat the Night King, what Daenerys looked like with only candlelight on her bare skin, the thoughts swirled and mixed in his brain, driving him to
madness. He’d left his room to take a walk and clear his head.

The walk had ended outside of her door. He couldn’t even be surprised. He rested his forehead against the wood before knocking, letting the inevitable happen.

She opened the door, looking more beautiful than he remembered. Her hair was fully down, the first time he’d ever seen it like that. Gods, did she look gorgeous and wild like that. He bolted the door behind him. They said nothing, melting together, engaging in a dance as old as humanity.

Naked and sweaty, she rested her head on his chest and he put his arm around her. Tyrion’s words came back to him. This woman might become his wife, though their children would bare her name. Jon had never imagined a wife or children growing up, but now that they were in his reach, he saw that he desperately wanted that future. One that was too good to ever be true.

It was one more reason to defeat the Night King.

“I’m sorry we weren’t able to leave for Winterfell today. I know you want to get back to your family.”

Daenerys’s words made Jon close his eyes. He did miss his family and his home. Sansa wasn’t safe with Littlefinger, and Jon hated leaving her behind. He longed to see Arya and Bran, even if they had changed. He hadn’t been separated from Ghost for such a long period of time since his time with the free folk. He’d sworn to protect them all, but how could he do that from White Harbor?

He felt Daenerys’ finger tracing his scars. Jon enjoyed the feeling. He would miss this. The carefree feeling of just being a man in love. He would have to keep his distance from Dany in Winterfell. Sansa likely was already furious at him for bending the knee, he didn’t need her agreeing with other northern lords about him being seduced by a foreign temptress.

Just like Robb.

“Jon?” He looked down and saw Danerys’ violet eyes studying him. He was surprised to find a hint of vulnerability there. He was so used to her being the self-confident queen, and the glimpses of the woman beneath were rare, even now. He brushed his lips against hers lightly.

He wanted to tell her that he loved her and wanted to marry her. Wanted to say they should make a stop in front of the Godswood before leaving tomorrow. Wanted to say a lot of foolish things to her. What he said was, “I do want to be home again.”

“What is that like?” She asked. “Having a home?”

Jon didn’t understand the question and said as much. Daenerys gave him a sad smile. “I’ve never had a home. Spent my entire childhood running and so far my adulthood has just been fighting. I remember a house with a red door and a lemon tree, but I wasn’t there long enough to consider it a home. Even Dragonstone…” She blinked. “It didn’t make me feel anything. I thought it would be different, returning home. I’ve dreamed of it my entire life, but I guess all I wanted was to be safe. To plant trees and watch them grow.”

Jon listened to her, wishing he could take away the pain that had been present in her life. “I want that too. To stop fighting, just sit and live life for a few years. I had that growing up in Winterfell. It wasn’t perfect, but I always felt safe, like nothing bad could happen in a keep that had stood for a thousand years. Sometimes, walking in Winterfell, I can get caught up in memories and go back to that feeling of safety. That’s what home is.”

Daenerys spoke so softly, Jon almost didn’t hear her. “I feel safe here, with you.”
He said nothing in return, but lifted her chin to look into her eyes. He saw the love he felt for her reflected in them. He kissed her softly and slowly, shifting her beneath him. He continued to kiss her slowly, not letting her speed up. He wanted this to last as long as it could.

He caressed every part of her, only stopped kissing her to look into her eyes. It was much like their first time together, but his feelings were even stronger now. He sucked on her fingers, kissed her ankles, enjoyed every part of her body, exploring it anew. It drove her mad, he knew that now, but he didn’t care. It would be as slow as he could stand it this time.

And Jon had patience. He also had the strength to stop her from flipping them over so she could take control. He usually enjoyed her over him, but right now he wanted to show her everything he felt for her. He couldn’t say it, but he could show her how he felt.

When he finally did enter her, Daenerys sighed in pleasure. His thrusts were slow, almost leisurely. He felt every tremor on his cock. He kissed any place he could reach and looked into her eyes often. Jon tried to treasure it, hold on to the feelings so that he could remember it in the cold nights ahead. He knew there would be the hopeless nights before battles when he would lie in his tent alone, fearful of all that could go wrong the next day. How many of his people would die. How many deaths he might be responsible for.

He would carry this in those nights. He would remember the feeling of Daenerys Targaryen coming apart beneath him for the rest of his life. She would be his reason to win, to return alive.

He released, his tongue entering her mouth as he spilled into her womb. He would make this feeling last a lifetime.

He didn’t think he would get a third one.

“You are making it easy to find you nowadays.” Varys entered the room with his usual silence.

Tyrion lifted his head from the table. He noticed his goblet was empty and poured the remainder of his bottle into it. He lifted it in a mock toast, “In these days of impossible things, I am happy to provide a sense of stability to us all. Dead men may walk and dragons may fly, but I will remain drunk through it all.”

Varys took a seat nearby. “I had thought you’d changed. You’ve been sober for most of your time as Hand of the Queen.”

“That was when we were fighting battles we could win. We sailed to Westeros with every advantage to win the Iron Throne. How did we end up here?”

“I hope you’re not planning on infecting our queen and king with your hopelessness.”

“Our king?” Tyrion took a drink as he studied his friend. “Is he our king now? Just because our queen took him as her lover. We certainly didn’t say such things about Daario.”

“He is more than her lover, as you well know.”

“I don’t know that I do.” Tyrion took another drink.
“Ask her to send him away then, like you did with Daario.”

“I’d have an easier time convincing her that those dead men she saw aren’t a real threat than telling her to send Jon Snow away. You know that.”

“I don’t know that I do,” Varys echoed his words back to him. “Does that mean I win our bet?”

“No,” Tyrion said. “Our bet was about the king’s feelings for her as compared to Jorah. I already knew our queen cared more for her current paramour than the last one.”

“It’s sort of beautiful isn’t it? That they would find love at the end of the world.”

Tyrion snorted. “You know, I can never tell when you’re being sarcastic, Varys.”

The spymaster said nothing in response to that. Tyrion said, “You know, I had forgotten what it was like until returning to Westeros, to be so openly despised. I mean, yes, the masters hated us and the Sons of the Harpy tried to kill us all, but our allies treated us fairly well. Now here we sit in the castle of a man we’re trying to save and his men call me ‘Imp,’ you ‘spider,’ and our queen a ‘foreign invader.’ Shouldn’t we get a better welcome in our home country?”

“Westeros isn’t my home country,” Varys corrected.

“That’s true,” Tyrion agreed. His face scrunched up. “You also get off the lightest as far nicknames go. How is that fair?”

“You’re forgetting they call me eunuch as well. I think I might prefer half-man to being called no man at all.”

Tyrion half nodded. “I guess it should be expected. Daenerys’ court is made of Westeros exiles. If we’d been loved, we never would have sought her out in the first place.”

“I think it’s telling that we were exiles though. If we’d been dumb, we all would have been killed in Westeros, like so many before us.”

“Exiles are killed too, you know. Like Ser Barristan or even that king before her, Daenerys’ brother, Viserys.”

“I met him once, the brother.”

That didn’t surprise Tyrion. He said nothing, letting his friend tell the full story or just leave it at that.

“I took a trip when King Robert had blown through the surplus of gold left by the Mad King. Aeris was terrible, but unlike Robert, could actually keep a budget. Or at least allow his small council do so. With Littlefinger as Master of Coin, I saw the impending doom. I wanted to explore other options. The exiled Targaryen children were the obvious choice.”

“They had been hiding out in Braavos at the time. I observed Viserys, disguised of course. He was impatient, vicious, prideful and petulant. I was not impressed. Honestly I think he may have been worse than Joffrey if he’d ever won the throne. No one was able to control him, but everyone could manipulate him. I saw that clearly enough. I resigned myself to whispering in Robert’s ear about eliminating the Targaryens once and for all. Sent my little birds aflutter.”

“I thought the trip a complete bust until I noticed the silver hair in the courtyard. It was the little girl. I didn’t think much of her. She was pretty, to be sure, playing with some nameless kitten in the
sweet manner children do. She seemed sweet and soft like any other little girl. I nearly missed it. The guard watching her in the corner. I noticed the way he looked at her. Not as an assigned guard watching over his charge, that watchful but slightly bored look. No, this man had the look of a protective father. He loved the girl. I watched her charm him, in her shy, quiet manner. She had named the black kitten Balerion and she asked the guard if he thought she would be able to conquer Westeros with her kitten when they were grown."

“He had replied, No, Princess.”

“You underestimate us, I think. The little girl said. For my Balerion shall be fiercer than any dragon.”

“The kitten meowed at that point and the guard smiled. I could see he was just refraining from laughing. It was extraordinary. My plans changed. The boy was worse than useless, but the girl. The girl might be something.”

“What happened?” Tyrion asked.

Varys sighed. “My birds work too quickly sometimes. The killers came that night. I had been right about the guard, he took a blade meant for the girl, giving the children the means to escape. The assassins had been mad their quarry had been lost along with their bounty. The servants had even stolen everything in the house before they had a chance to pick it over. They had bashed the kitten against the stone steps in their anger.”

“What interested me from their report was how the children acted while fleeing. Viserys had ranted and raved, screaming at his sister for not being careful enough, ruining it all. One of the men swore she had a fresh red welt on her cheek as they ran. But she said nothing, showed almost no emotion. She didn’t cry or despair. She’d merely thanked her guard right before he gave her life to protect her.”

Tyrion looked into his cup. “Why are you telling me all this now?”

“She’s different from that little girl now. She got much harder, but then, to live her life she had to. I think for both better and worse, the king is bringing out that sweet little girl playing with her kitten again.”

Tyrion thought a moment longer. “You knew the other brother too, didn’t you? Rhaegar. Jaime spoke of him sometimes.” Cersei did too, having said more than once that Rhaegar would have been the perfect husband and king instead of Robert’s boorishness. Tyrion had pointed out that Rhaegar had been a less than perfect husband to Elia Martell, as he ran off with another woman when his wife couldn’t give him anymore children. Cersei had merely glared at him and told him to shut up.

“I always wished one of Rhaegar’s children had survived. I should have been quicker in that plot, I admit. Rhaegar would have been a good king, I think. He just didn’t act quickly enough. He didn’t want to be king badly enough. Didn’t want to betray his father, despite knowing what he was. I’ve had to make do with the Mother of Dragons. I don’t know that she’s better or worse than her brother. But I think she will be a better monarch as we face the Long Night.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Rhaegar was like Robert in that he could look away from things he didn’t want to know or admit easily. Unlike Robert, Rhaegar usually came around to confront them, but by then it was too late. Daenerys doesn’t seem to know that giving up is an option in any fight.”
Tyrion lifted his glass in a toast. “Our queen is a fierce one.”

“Yes. I think it will serve her well in the North. It can’t be can’t be coincidence that every northman that has spent significant time with her has fallen deeply in love with her. Northmen seem to like their women fierce and a little wild.”

Tyrion hadn’t thought of that, which was embarrassing really. Varys wasn’t supposed to outthink him, not on people’s behaviors. It was Tyrion’s most prized talent. “I don’t think she will have enough time to court all of the northmen though. How many plots to kill her have your little birds sussed out already?”

“Many, as expected. Most of them half-baked grumblings though. The reports that disturb me more are the ones where the plan includes the King in the North as well. Very reminiscent of Red Wedding.”

Tyrion sighed, worried about that. “My father is gone now. I doubt anyone else could pull off that master stroke.”

“It needn’t be as clever as all that. Just two dead bodies.” Varys looked out the window. “Part of me can’t help but be a romantic about those two sometimes. Love has destroyed the realm so many times. It would be nice to have it save the realm just once.”

So his earlier statement hadn’t been sarcastic. “Who knew the spider had a heart?” Tyrion joked.

“Perhaps I do, but who would believe you if you tried to tell others?”

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Jon didn’t dream often, and when he did they were odd things. Ones where he took Ghost’s form, running through forests and hunting. Sometimes they even felt more like visions than true dreams.

So he wasn’t surprised to find himself in a tent he’d never been before, he could hear the army outside and saw the battle plans spread out around him. He walked over to study one.

It was a map of Westeros and showed Stark men fighting Lannisters. He had never been in this tent, so he couldn’t be sure, but he thought he knew where he was.

His suspicions were confirmed as the tent flapped open, and Jon turned to face the last King in the North.

His brother, Robb Stark.

Jon hadn’t seen his brother since he’d left Winterfell for the Night’s Watch. Never knew Robb Stark, King in the North. He imagined him much as he had known him, but with a stern look, more resembling their father. Jon shook his head, not knowing if this was real, but wanting to say the words he’d wanted to say to his brother for a long time, “I should have been there. I should have fought with you.”

Robb smirked, a familiar face in Jon’s memories, “Then you would have died beside me and the North would have been unprotected when the Long Winter came.”

Jon couldn’t argue with that. He never could argue with Robb. His brother’s nobility always made
it impossible. “I can’t believe I followed you as King in the North.”

“I can,” Robb said.

“You were always the best of us. If you couldn’t hold it…” Jon cut off, not wanting to highlight his brother’s failings or remember his own.

“Have you ever been in love, Jon?”

Jon had missed so much of Robb’s life, and Robb had missed so much of his. “Yes,” Jon replied. “Twice.”

“That’s once more than me, not bad for the boy who had said he’d die a virgin.” Jon flushed at the memory at that brothel. Robb and Theon had tried convince Jon that he had to have at least one woman before taking his vows. “One happy memory to warm those cold nights alone in your bed on the wall,” Theon had called it. Neither of them could understand him. He’d always been the outsider, a foreign lord more Robb’s brother than Jon had been sometimes.

But then look how that turned out.

Jon brushed aside the memory. “What was she like? I never got to meet your wife.” And the ones who knew her now only called her the foreign whore Robb had lost his kingdom for. Jon knew there must be more to her than that. Robb wouldn’t have married her without good reason. Jon wished he could have met her and formed his own opinion of his brother’s wife.

Robb softened into a small smile, “She was kind and beautiful. She gave up her title as a lady to help men. She was a healer. She had a gentle heart but could be as fierce as any wolf. I loved her so.”

“Was she worth losing the North?” Jon had to know.

“Yes,” Robb’s smile broke. “She’d been with child. We were going to name him Eddard.”

Jon didn’t know how to begin to comfort him. Didn’t know how he could possibly help with such a devastating loss. Robb would have made a great father, much like their own.

“What about your woman? What is she like?”

Jon didn’t ask or wonder how Robb knew there was a woman. Robb had always had the uncanny ability to read Jon’s thoughts. “She is beautiful, fierce and bold. Aegon the Conqueror reborn. The Mother of Dragons and a bunch of other titles I can’t remember. A woman of fire and blood. She freed slaves, she birthed dragons, and she commands massive armies. She is so beyond my reach, I still don’t understand how she could love me back.”

Robb looked impressed. But then even Manderly, who despised Daenerys and thought his king a fool who allowed himself to be seduced, had conceded that Jon’s foreign whore was a better prize than Robb’s. The small part of Jon that had always been jealous of his perfect brother had delighted in the knowledge that he had outmatched him at least in one area. Robb’s gaze seemed to study the woman in question, sleeping under a pile of furs. Jon blinked. How and when had they returned to her room in New Castle? But then dreams didn’t allow for logical questions.

Robb’s voice took on a teasing tone, “For a man who swore never to father a bastard, you certainly seemed determined to break that vow too.”

“The long night is here, men must take what little pleasures they can. Plus, she claims she can’t get
pregnant.” Then Jon gave an honest answer, even more honest with his dead brother than with himself, “I hope she does. I pray for an excuse to marry her.”

Jon remembered Maester Aemon’s words once again, “Love is the death of duty.” He hadn’t understood then, but he knew too well now. He wished Aemon had had the chance to meet his last living relative. Thought Daenerys would have loved to meet her great uncle.

Robb looked at his brother. “You’re already lost, aren’t you? Already too deeply in to save yourself.”

“Aye,” Jon closed his eyes. “Any advice?”

“There’s so much I would have done differently, knowing what I know now. Prevent infighting as much as you can, remind them of your common enemy. The war is more important than slights of honor, questionable decisions, anything else that might drive them apart. Survival is the only thing that matters.”

Jon nodded along. Then Robb met his eyes, “Don’t let them hate her. They may never love her, may never understand your love for her, but don’t let them hate her.”

Jon closed his eyes, inhaling deeply. When he opened them again, his brother’s ghost was gone. Jon blinked a few more times, trying to bring him back, but it was pointless.

Jon woke now, the room was dark and he was lying in the bed with his queen. It had been so real though. He looked at Daenerys. The moonlight made her hair look like spun silver. She never looked so beautiful. Jon knew he should take the opportunity to sneak back to his room, but he brought her closer, his heart too full to consider such an action at this moment.

Certain she was asleep and wouldn’t hear him, Jon whispered, “I love you.”

He allowed himself to relax after that and drift off into sleep.
Journey to the North

The screams echoed throughout the catacombs. Qyburn felt nothing about them. He took no pleasure in others’ pain, but it didn’t horrify him either. It was a natural reaction to his experimentation. He wondered if he should be noting it. Track who seemed to suffer the most or at least vocalized it the most.

But his experiments weren’t about pain — that was just a side effect, not worth noting he decided.

He once worried about the screams drawing the wrong attention, but as Hand of the Queen and with outside threats neutralized for the moment, he had free reign. He’d never felt as alive as he had in these years of his service to his queen. She allowed him to push the bonds of science and human knowledge.

This discovery of living dead men was fascinating to him. Yes, he’d had previous success with the Mountain, but nothing like what he’d seen at the Dragonpit. While it wasn’t tested, he was sure that Clegane wouldn’t keep moving once sliced up. He only wished the northern king had brought more wights. He needed more for his experiments.

He’d asked his queen about possibly mounting a mission to gather a few, but she’d refused him. It rarely ever happened, and he felt like he should obey her.

But he had sent some of Varys’ former birds to see about it anyway.

It was too good of an opportunity to pass up.

“Maester Qyburn,” a boy approached him, as he rearranged some of his tools. Qyburn recognized the boy as one of the Kingsguard squires. He looked deeply disturbed and uncomfortable. It was a look Qyburn was used to, his experiments had always caused those reactions in the narrow minded.

He stayed polite in spite of the boy’s discomfort. “Yes?”

“The Queen summons you for a small council meeting in her chamber.”

Qyburn nodded. Now that council consisted of only two people, the queen had taken to hosting the meetings at the small table in her chambers. He guessed that would change when Euron Greyjoy returned with their new army, but for now it suited them both. He finished his tasks and made his way to his queen.

He found her waiting, wine in hand. “We need to discuss what to do about my brother.”

“Which brother?” He closed the door behind him, leaving only him, his queen and her faithful guard in the room.

“Jaime,” she spat. She looked at him with such malice, as though he’d been the one to betray her instead of her beloved brother.

“What can we do?”

“Send assassins after him. People die on the Kingsroad all the time. He shouldn’t be allowed to discuss our plans with that foreign invader and her northern pet.”

Qyburn spoke softly, “Your grace, he doesn’t know all of our plans. That is but a small part in how
we will secure your rule forever. Besides, the King in the North will not abandon his home to fight you and the invader queen will not break her pledge to him. Honorable people are so predictable.”

Cersei nodded. She took another sip of her wine, looking more pleased now thinking on their grand plan. “How are our plans coming along?”

“Nicely,” Qyburn was happy to report. “We should be ready when Greyjoy returns with your new army.”

Cersei nodded. She walked to the window overlooking her capital city. Qyburn observed how queenly she appeared, looking down on her subjects. “Do you know what my father said of the smallfolk, Lord Qyburn?”

“No, your grace.”

“He told me that as long as you kept them fed and entertained with stories they were easy to control. I tried religion, but I’m finding the stories of the mad king’s daughter to be better.” Cersei sipped her wine. “People still remember the horrible things her father did with wildfire. Killing so many innocents.” The queen turned to face her only advisor. “Just imagine what the foreign invader will do with her dragons. How many will burn because of her madness and thirst for power.”

“Unthinkable, your grace.” Qyburn agreed. “The woman would surely burn the Red Keep to the ground, given half the chance.”

“And she’s stupid enough to trust my little brother.” Cersei walked to sit at the chair behind her desk. “They are both too soft-hearted to rule. They cannot do what needs to be done.”

“Soft-hearted,” Qyburn agreed. “But we are not. We will be the last ones standing, your grace.”

Cersei smirked in response.

“I hear were are leaving today,” Tyrion wished for wine, but Varys words had stuck with him. He needed his wits about him as they traveled north to battle an impossible enemy.

Daenerys pinned the last of her braids. She turned to face her Hand. “Yes, we’ve been imposing on Lord Manderly’s generosity too long.”

“I had thought I had gotten here early enough to catch the King in the North as well. I had hoped to speak to you together.”

Daenerys tapped on her vanity table before rising. “You disapprove.”

“I do, at least for the moment,” Tyrion agreed. “Not that it matters to you.”

Daenerys sighed, “It matters. You matter to me, Lord Tyrion. Your words and your opinion matter to me. It’s why I made you my Hand.”

Tyrion wanted to finger the pin on his chest. “You haven’t listened to me much lately.”

“Advise me now.” Daenerys sat on her bed, adjusting her robe. “How should I present myself to
these northern lords in Winterfell? If they are anything like this Manderly, they will be disrespectful fools.”

“I’m surprised you’re not asking Lord Snow on this. He knows the north better than I.”

“Jon Snow has told me to be patient.” She bit her lips before continuing. “He knows the north, yes, but he is a man of the north. He may not have a clear view of his people. I need an outsider’s view.”

Tyrion looked at his queen. Sometimes he wondered why he was here. Why he didn’t just stay in Illyrio’s villa, drinking good wine until his death. Then he remembered what she had said to him when she made him her Hand. He remembered her goal was to try to fix the world for dwarfs, bastards, cripples and other broken things, or at least make it better. He remembered that she needed his help to do it. He said, “What were you thinking?”

She stood, walked across the room to finger a black fur coat, “First, I think a change of wardrobe is in order. They expect a Targaryen queen, and it’s time we gave them what they expect.”

“You’re not afraid that would isolate them from you? Do I need to explain to you again why exactly they revolted against your father?”

“They aren’t going to love me until after I save them. People in the North don’t care how I look or what I say, my actions are all they will see. I must help win their war to win their hearts. Until then, I want them to respect me. I want them to fear me.”

“Fear you?” The words seemed more familiar coming from Cersei’s mouth.

“Yes.”

He wasn’t convinced, but Tyrion thought he understood what his queen was planning. “Are you planning to start with Lord Manderly?”

Daenerys smirked.

Jon tightened the pack on his horse. He was ready to leave now. He wanted to leave. He looked over to Ser Davos. “Are we still waiting on the queen?”

“Aye, and Lord Manderly.”

Jon rolled his eyes. They didn’t have time for the pleasantries. The wall was down. The Night King was marching towards them with his army right now. They had no time.

He noticed the Unsullied warriors come to attention before he saw her. Her men turned with a precision that still surprised him in its perfect uniformity. He’d known men who’d trained as warriors since boys and still wouldn’t be able match the perfect movements of her former slave army. He looked beyond them and saw their queen.

The sight of her made his breath catch. She looked beautiful and fierce. She was wearing her house colors, black and red. Her cloak flowed behind her, looking like her dragon’s wings. She walked to the front of her army, looking over them with careful eyes. Nodding to the ones who were brave
enough to make eye contact with her.

Jon watched, never having seen his queen interact with her army. She acted like the best commanders he knew, allowing those who would die for her, see and know her.

He might have loved her just for that.

Jon shook his head. There was no time for that either. He had to focus on getting the armies ready and on the road. The queen had told him last night that the Dothraki hadn’t lost any time due to the storm and would meet them in a few days’ time, further along the Kingsroad than planned.

She’d seemed proud of her horselords. Daenerys had told him about her time with the Dothraki and how she had found herself as a Khaleesi, grown from a scared girl to a fierce woman. Jon wished he could have seen it. He couldn’t imagine the girl Daenerys described, couldn’t imagine her cowering at anything, let alone a cruel brother.

Then again, maybe it was good he hadn’t been around. He doubted he would have given Khal Drogo a chance to kill Viserys Targaryen. Seeing the little shit mistreat his sister once would have had Jon seeing red. He remembered what he’d done to Ramsay Bolton when that had happened last.

Jon pushed the thoughts away, climbing on his mount. He avoided Daenerys’ gaze. His eyes searched for Lord Manderly. The fat lord still hadn’t made an appearance.

Jon wondered if they really had to wait for the lord before remembering that he was taking a host of Manderly men. Their lord would want to see them off. He gripped his reins tighter. They didn’t have time for late appearances.

He glanced at the queen, who was still among her army. She stood next to Grey Worm and another who was holding her horse. Jon recognized the look from the first time they met, she was playing the intimidating queen. He was proud that he was getting to know her well enough to know such things, but he didn’t understand why she was doing that now.

Lord Manderly chose that moment to make his entrance. Jon had to refrain from snapping at his bannerman for holding them up. The lord gave him a slight bow, only glancing in Daenerys’ direction. Jon wished the lord would stop doing that, being barely civil to the queen.

Daenerys’ eyes stayed on her men, ignoring the northern lord. Jon dismounted again and walked over to him alone. Lord Manderly held out an arm, which Jon took. “I wish I was coming with you. Gods, if only I’d known there was so much fighting left in my later years, I might have kept in fighting shape for them.”

Jon doubted the lord’s words. No one wanted to spend their later years fighting. But he said nothing, nodding instead. Manderly looked past the queen’s army to his own men. “5,000 as promised. Use them well, King Snow.”

Jon nodded again, “Thank you, my lord. The North will remember.”

Manderly nodded and replied, “The North will survive.”

Daenerys walked up, looking like a Targaryen queen. Jon’s eyes raked over her tight figure before he could stop them. She really did look stunning. She gave Lord Manderly a tight smile.

The Lord nodded to her, “My Lady, it’s been a pleasure meeting you. You’ve been a most honored guest.”
Daenerys’ eyes narrowed slightly. “I am not a Lady, my Lord. I am a queen.”

Lord Manderly smiled the way an adult did when indulging a child. “You are not my queen.”

Daenerys’ eyes stayed narrowed and Jon worried about what that meant. She whispered something to Grey Worm who had the Unsullied move. This increased Jon’s worry. Daenerys turned back to the northern lord, her tone even, “Have you seen the enemy, Lord Manderly? The army of the dead?”

“No, but I believe my king’s word.” He looked at Jon Snow. “I believe the word of Ned Stark’s son.”

“I have seen it, and he’s right. Nothing else matters except defeating the Night King and his army. The throne, our petty disputes, it’s nothing in the face of the enemy we must defeat. So I’ve let things pass. Unimportant things like not calling me by my proper title, not giving me a seat of honor at your feast. These small formalities mean nothing as we face the Long Night.”

Daenerys points at a spot. Jon doesn’t understand what it means until he hears the cry of a dragon. Manderly’s men flinch and duck, but Jon doesn’t. Not anymore. “But they are important aren’t they? Because I mean to win this fight. I mean to take the Iron Throne when I’m done, and the North is one of the Seven Kingdoms I will rule. I am your queen, Lord Manderly. You will refer to me as such and you will kneel before your monarch.”

Drogon landed where his mother instructed. The size and sight of a real dragon caused much fear and commotion. Jon had to rush to settle his horse that reared up at the predator. He saw out of the corner of eye how paniced the soldiers of White Harbor were, seeing the dragon for what was probably the first time. Jon understood, it was one thing to hear the tales, quite another to see a dragon with your own eyes.

The Unsullied didn’t move.

“I serve the King in the North.” Lord Manderly said.

“You also serve your queen.”

The dragon roared.

Manderly kneeled. “Your Grace.”

Daenerys’ tight smile returned. “Thank you for hosting us, Lord Manderly. White Harbor is a lovely city, and I hope my next visit here will be much more pleasant.” The queen said a command to her dragon in High Valyrian, a language Jon didn’t understand but was growing to love hearing from her lips.

Mostly because she slipped into it when she was overwhelmed with pleasure. Jon ignored the tug at his groin, putting the thoughts away, reminding himself that there was no time for that right now.

Drogon gave the fat lord one more look before taking off with a roar. Jon looked up to see his brother already flying overhead.

Daenerys climbed onto her horse with an effortless grace. She turned to her army and ordered, “Dovaogëдыs! Næjot memëbatäs!” She led their march, her small council following her army, while the northern men watched. Jon was surprised to see Lord Varys on a horse. He couldn’t recall the man ever looking as uncomfortable or unhappy.
Manderly looked to Jon, who was waiting to ride out with the younger Manderly and their forces. “Would’ve she killed me?”

Jon hoped the answer was no, but he couldn’t know for sure. “Maybe. She is the queen. She can give such orders.”

“And you would have done nothing?” Manderly looked annoyed.

“I am glad you so much confidence in me, Lord Manderly, but I cannot single-handedly stop a dragon.”

Manderly’s fear returned and he nodded. “Those dragons…I’ve never seen…by the gods. Dragons.” Lord Manderly couldn’t form the words. “They obey her? She pointed and the beast landed right there. I’ve never seen the like.”

“They aren’t beasts,” Jon corrected automatically. “She is their mother. From what I understand, she doesn’t command them exactly, but they do follow her instruction.”

Lord Manderly let out a breath, shaking his head. “She could kill us all. I understand now. I understand why the dragons ruled. How can you not bow before that? I have my pride, but not kneeling would just be stupidity. Have you seen its fire?”

Jon thought of what he’d seen beyond the wall. Thought of the mass destruction those dragons had caused within minutes. Thought about how relieved he’d been. He remembered looking up at Daenerys and knowing in that moment he could no longer pretend he didn’t love her. He said, “Yes, it’s so hot it’s as if the ground explodes.”

Manderly shakes his head again. “She could level my city before I’d even have a chance to raise a call to arms. I’m glad you didn’t get us into a fight with her.” He looked out towards the Dragon Queen. “I’m glad she’s on our side.”

“Aye,” Jon agreed following his lord’s gaze.

Lord Manderly lowered his voice, “You really care for a woman that terrifying?”

“I am man of the North. Did you think I would care for a soft southern maid?”

Manderly chuckled, “I suppose not.” He looked off at the army leaving his city. “I still would prefer you take one of my granddaughters for your wife, but she might not be the worst queen we could have.”

Jon knew it was the closest thing to support he was going to get from the lord. He nodded. “Take care of your city, Lord Manderly. We will try to stop the army before it can reach here, but it wouldn’t hurt to be prepared for anything.”

Lord Manderly nodded. “My men and my people’s lives are your hands, my king.”

Jon nodded, feeling the weight settle on his shoulders. He climbed back on his horse and pushed forward to lead the men of White Harbor alongside Davos and the younger Manderly.

“How could the king even think of bringing that foreign invader up here?”
Sansa wished Jon would arrive at Winterfell already. If just so that he could repeatedly answer the same questions over and over again. “The King in the North left to find us allies and dragonglass. He returns with both. Queen Targaryen and her dragons…”

“She’s no queen of mine.”

Mugs were banged on the tables in agreement around the hall. There were bursts of “Never trust a Targaryen” and “Mad King’s daughter” and other grumblings. Sansa refrained from sighing. She did raise her voice to be heard over the grumbling. “We need southern allies. After the fighting ends, if the North keeps its independence, we need to be allied with whoever sits on the Iron Throne. We cannot keep fighting wars with the south.”

“No southern ruler will allow us independence. That’s why we must fight for it.” Cheers followed the statement.

Sansa rose and the hall quieted. “I know the south and King’s Landing better than any of you. I was held captive there for years. I don’t want a southern ruler either, but…” Sansa remembered what Jon had told her their father said about using that word. She couldn’t really disagree, as she already knew they’d be bowing to a southern ruler no matter what she said. “…but one of the queens will sit on the Iron Throne when this is all over. I don’t know Daenerys Targaryen, but I know Cersei Lannister. She is the woman who killed my direwolf; she is the woman who allowed her bastard to chop off my father’s head; and she is a cruel woman, not fit to be queen. Jon has spent several months with the Dragon Queen brokering this alliance. I have no reason not to trust his judgement that she would be the better option for a ruler to the north.”

Sansa kept the thought to herself that she couldn’t imagine many women who would be a worse option than Cersei Lannister.

Most of the lords took a moment to process her words. Then one cried out, “What do we care about southern queens? Our interest is in the north it should remain in the north.”

Lady Mormont finished the thought, “Just like our king should have remained in the north.” Cheers of agreement again.

Out of the corner of her eye, Sansa saw Arya twirling her blade. She silently commanded her sister not to make the situation worse with bloodshed. Sansa said, “We must care because they would be the country at our border. Just like we must care about the horrors beyond the wall. Because we are the first people who must deal with the problem. If the undead army reaches south it will be too late for us. That’s why we must convince them to come up here. And our king has done that. Three armies march towards Winterfell to defend the north. It is our best chance.”

Sansa could tell from the looks on their faces the lords weren’t convinced, but she also found there were no more objections. She counted that as a win. The northern lords were dismissed and shuffled out of the hall. Lady Mormont’s eyes meet Sansa’s in an uncomfortable study, as if the young lady knew Sansa was hiding something.

But she left as well. Sansa breathed a little easier.

When only the two Stark women remained, Arya complimented Sansa, “Not bad.”

“You no longer question my loyalty to our brother then?”

Arya didn’t reply, which Sansa thought was significant. “You still haven’t told them that their king bent the knee.”
“Jon made that decision on his own; he can deal with the consequences.” Sansa tapped on the wood of the table before continuing. “Lord Baelish thought he might be looking to make a marriage alliance with her.”

Arya rolled her eyes. “Littlefinger is dead, sister. He shouldn’t still be poisoning your thoughts.”

“It makes sense though. The dragon queen is said to be beautiful.”

“She is,” Arya agreed. Sansa didn’t realize that Arya had ever seen her, but Arya explained before her sister could ask, “At least the artists in Braavos made her portraits look beautiful. But Jon wouldn’t be taken in by a pretty face.”

“Robb was,” Sansa said bitterly.

Arya’s face instantly turned hard and angry. “Robb was betrayed. I was there. Cowardly men struck him down. I won’t let that happen again. Jon will not be betrayed. Not while I live.”

Sansa didn’t know that Arya had been there. She wanted to ask about it, but one look at Arya told her now was not the time for such questions. It also probably wasn’t the time to mention that Jon had been betrayed as well. “We can’t trust her.”

“She’s not Cersei, Sansa. This queen…Jon wouldn’t bring someone like Cersei here with him.”

“He’s allied with her as well,” Sansa pointed out. Brienne had told them how the Dragon pit meeting had gone. Sansa hadn’t been surprised that Cersei had refused to help. She wasn’t sure she trusted that the Lannister queen was going to keep her word to help. It didn’t feel right to Sansa. Cersei wouldn’t just drop everything to help those she saw as enemies. Even if it meant certain death for her.

Arya interrupted Sansa’s thoughts. “But she’s staying safe in the Red Keep. Her brother is leading the army. This dragon queen marches with her armies. She’s at least better than Cersei.”

“That’s not saying much.”

“No, it’s not,” Arya agreed. “But we’ll meet her and decide for ourselves.” She paused. “If she proves to be a threat, I’ll kill her.”

Sansa smirked, knowing that’s exactly what her sister would do. Dragons be damned. She nodded and stood. “There’s much to do. Jon will be back soon and the war is coming.”

Daenerys looked out over the armies they’d gathered so far, wringing her hands for warmth. Did they have enough men? She thought of the Army of the Dead she’d seen behind the wall. She didn’t know. It didn’t seem like it.

She knew her Unsullied would face any enemy for her, knew they would fight to the last man. Sometimes she hated the responsibility of that. She wanted to command them well, wanted to prove that she deserved the trust they placed in her.

Yet she was placing them against an impossible enemy. She worried for them. She worried for all of her people.
She stopped the movement of her hands. She didn’t like the North. Its constant cold went against her warm nature. She felt she might have to walk into a fire to actually get warm enough for her comfort.

She nearly laughed at the thought of doing such a thing in front of Jon Snow, just to watch his worried reaction.

Her eyes drifted over to where the King in the North stood with Jorah Mormont and Missandei. They were instructing the Unsullied on the importance on staying warm and warning against the effects of frostbite and freezing to death. Daenerys probably should be listening as well, but she felt she knew enough.

Plus, she guessed the King in the North would personally look after her. A small smile and blush crept to her face thinking of just how well he would treat her when they were alone in her tent later this evening.

“Your grace,” Ser Davos approached, interrupting her thoughts.

Daenerys nodded to the older man. She noticed he was struggling against the cold as well, though not hugging himself as she did. His clenched fists and tight shoulders gave away his discomfort though. “You’re not from the North, are you Ser Davos?”

“No, your grace,” he replied. “I was born in Flea Bottom.” He explained further at her look of confusion. “It’s the poor part of King’s Landing.”

She nodded. She should know that. There was so much yet to learn about her home, about the kingdom she planned to rule. “You’re a lord now though. Where is home for you?”

“Cape Wrath. My wife and several of my children are there.”

“You must miss them.”

“Aye,” Ser Davos looked saddened. “I haven’t seen them in many years.”

“We will beat the dead quickly so that you may return home soon.”

Davos raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think even you have the power to do that.”

Daenerys couldn’t really disagree with his statement, so she said nothing. Davos spoke next, “Are you planning on terrifying all of the northern lords into submission?”

Her face hardened. Davos was Jon’s advisor but not hers. “When most men look at me, they don’t see a ruler or a conqueror, they just see a young woman. Someone to be pushed aside and ignored. I can’t afford to be seen that way. I have to demand respect.”

“Respect and fear are not the same thing.”

“No, but most people respect those they fear.”

Davos looked out at the king he served. “I served King Stannis before serving Jon Snow.” Daenerys nodded, Tyrion had given her notes on Davos Seaworth after their first meeting. “Stannis was not a much loved man. He was too stern to win the easy affections his brothers had. But I respected him more than anyone. Because you knew exactly where you stood with a man like Stannis Baratheon. He was tough but fair.”
Daenerys nodded to the old smuggler’s covered hand. “He’s the reason you’re missing part of hand and yet you still followed him?”

“Aye,” Davos said. “The best smugglers are the ones who don’t get caught. I was one of the best, so the man who caught me was better.”

“I doubt that’s always true.”

“No, but in my case it was.”

Daenerys didn’t know what else to say. She looked at Jon, who was now showing his longsword to Grey Worm. The queen wondered what they were talking about. She asked Davos, “How did you come to serve Jon Snow?”

“It’s a long story.”

Daenerys looked over, but Davos didn’t say anything more. She asked instead, “Why do you serve him? You’ve told me why you followed Stannis.”

“I think that Jon Snow is the best hope humanity has in facing what’s coming.” He looked at the queen. “Him and you.” His tone turned sarcastic. “Despite the fact that your years combined is still less than me.”

Daenerys allowed a small smile. “And what do you envision for the world after we defeat the dead?”

Davos shrugged. “Haven’t thought that far ahead.”

“Really? My advisors are always talking about what happens next. What reforms I should pass when I’m on the throne. Asking me about the line of succession and heirs.”

“Your advisors are far wiser men than I am.”

“Maybe it’s because we have to look at what comes after. Have to focus on a positive future so as not to fall to despair in the fight ahead.”

Davos’ jaw shifted, as if considering his next words carefully. “I understand that.” He turned to face the queen fully. “My queen, I was with Jon Snow in the last battle he faced.” Daenerys’ brow furrowed, what did that have to do with anything? “He was…He has always seemed to struggle with a deep melancholy. And I don’t think he expected to live through his fight with the Boltons.”

Daenerys’ breath caught. How could he? Why was Davos telling her this?

“He’s different now. It may still be there, but it’s deeper down now. I think you have a lot to do with that.”

“Different?” Daenerys struggled to push her anger down. “He volunteered for a suicide mission a month ago.”

Davos chuckled, “Beg pardon, your grace. But he didn’t do that to die; he did that to impress a pretty lady.”

Daenerys nearly rolled her eyes. “Why do men think stupid heroics impress women?”

“Men often act stupid around beautiful women. We can’t help it.” His voice took on a teasing tone. “Besides, it seems to work in the end.”
Daenerys ducked her head. She couldn’t deny that. Every stupid, heroic, brave thing Jon Snow did – it frustrated her to no end, but it was also what made her fall in love with him. She looked over at him again. He was demonstrating some sword moves while Grey Worm copied his movements with his own short sword. “We’ll have to work together to keep him alive, Ser Davos.”

“I think you staying alive would help a lot with that.” Daenerys glanced at Davos, who looked grave. “I don’t want to see what effect your death would have on him.”

Daenerys went back to watching Jon with Grey Worm. She felt a chill and wrapped her arms around her tighter.

They had planned in Daenerys’ tent since hers was largest. They didn’t have the long tables or the details of the painted table to really plan well, so they made do by pushing a couple of smaller tables together and using sigil stamps as army markers.

Jon lingered afterwards, trying to appear casual about it, but knowing only Wylis Manderly might have been fooled. He fingered a book, which Daenerys had lying on top of a stack.

She entered, dressed more causally now, and saw what he was flipping through, “Tyrion gave it to me. He said it was a book every king or queen should read.”

“Have you read it?”

“I read it on the journey to Westeros. Good thing. I haven’t had much reading time as of late.”

Jon nodded. He took her in. She had her hair down and wore a fur cloak though he suspected not much more than a shift was on underneath it. She offered him a warm beverage, which he accepted. “What’s the book about?” Jon thought about adding that maybe he should read it, but didn’t want Daenerys to get the wrong impression. He still bent the knee. She was his queen.

Daenerys frowned slightly. “It’s very dense and dry. I feel like I’m going to have to read it two more times before I fully understand it.”

Jon’s eyebrows raised as he took a sip of the mug she offered. He wasn’t entirely sure what this drink was, guessing it was something from Essos. But it warmed him up and the spices actually tasted quite good. “Sounds fun.”

Jon had been an avid reader in his youth, mostly he used it as an escape from his childish troubles of not having a mother and not being a trueborn son. His favorite stories had been about the dragons and their riders.

Maybe it was why he’d fallen for the first one he’d ever met.

He took another long drink.

Daenerys sat across from him on a lounge couch. Jon wasn’t sure where it came from or who had carried it, but she looked good on it. Even though she huddled Practically into a ball to keep warm. He smiled softly and took the chair across from her.

Daenerys looked at her mug as she said, “There’s room over here.”
Jon did smile now. Not just for warmth then. He sat by her feet where most of the empty space was, pulling her legs into his lap and slipping a hand underneath her furs to caress her bare skin.

Jon imagined a world where this was just a regular night. One where the army of the dead and the Night King were still just stories. One where he was already married to the woman he loved and this was all just a part of their nightly routine. To sit together, share a drink and talk.

How he longed to live in that world.

Daenerys brought him back to reality, “Manderly mentioned your sister asking the northern houses to send whatever supplies and food stores they could to Winterfell. Do you think it will be enough? We should send a raven to King’s Landing to make sure the Lannister army brings what they can from the south.”

Jon closed his eyes for a moment. He knew this was important. He even respected how single-minded and focused his queen could get on the task at hand. But he wished she could just enjoy the moment. He continued touching her soft skin and said, “Sansa’s always been a great organizer. I’m sure everything will be as ready as it could possibly be.”

Daenerys nodded. Then she set down her mug, biting her lip. “Do you think she’ll hate me?”

Jon’s eyebrow lifted, “Sansa? No.” Jon didn’t want to lie. “She probably won’t like you at first, but she’ll come around. Her loyalty is hard won, but stronger than any steel once forged.”

Daenerys’ legs moved, rubbing against each other. “That’s smart. Only fools trust everyone.” She picked up her mug again to sip on the spiced drink. “Though only bigger fools trust no one at all.”

Jon looked at her, not expecting to hear that. Daenerys continued, “No one can make it through this life alone. I’ve been alone for most my life.” She looked down at her mug, a sad smile spreading. “It’s even worse as a queen. I’m never alone, but I always am.”

Jon understood completely. “My father always used to tell me that it was hard to be a ruler. Because no matter how much you might love your men, you had to keep a distance, never be their friend. Because some day you may need swing the blade against them.” Jon remembered the first execution his father had brought him to, when he’d swung Ice to kill some criminal. Robb hadn’t been there, just Jon. He couldn’t even remember what crime the man had committed now.

Daenerys asked softly, “Have you ever had to execute one of your men?”

Jon nodded. “Several during my time as Lord Commander.” He hoped she didn’t ask more. He wasn’t sure he wanted to talk about the men who’d killed him. Didn’t want to think about Olly. Or the ones that came before that.

“Me too. In Meereen. He was one of my first, most devoted followers there. A slave I’d freed. But he’d broken a law and I had to…I beheaded him.”

Jon’s hand stopped moving, holding her instead. His eyes met hers. He told her, “My father always told us that if we passed the sentence we had to swing the sword.”

As soon as the words left him, Jon wished he hadn’t said them. He doubted Daenerys preformed her own executions. But the queen didn’t seem to respond to his mistake. She leaned forward, her hand holding his cheek. He leaned into her warmth. “You really loved him, didn’t you? Your father?”

“Aye,” Jon agreed. His eyes closed. He couldn’t remember a time he’d felt so…comforted? Loved?
He wasn’t sure what this feeling was. He just wanted it to last a little longer.

Daenerys’ forehead met his, Jon brought her closer, her legs wrapping around his waist as he pulled her into his lap. She whispered against his lips, “I wish I’d had that.”

Jon captured her lips with his in a soft, brief kiss. He kissed her again and again. Between his kisses, he asked, “Had what?”

The kisses stayed light, but Daenerys’ fingers went into his hair, toying with his curls. Jon loved the feeling. “A family to love. A family who loved me. All I had was Viserys.”

Jon moved forward, pushing Daenerys back. His tongue now entered their kissing. His hands moved up completely under her furs. He’d been right. Only a silk dress separated his queen from him under those furs. His hand moved again.

She wasn’t even wearing underclothes. Jon bit off the moan that threatened to bubble out.

Daenerys continued talking, “Viserys often blamed me for the downfall of our family.”

Jon focused on what she was saying but didn’t stop his hands. He didn’t understand. “You were a babe in your mother’s womb for most of the rebellion. How could it possibly been your fault?”

“I was born too late.” She replied as if the answer was obvious. “Rhaegar didn’t have a Targaryen bride to wed and had to settle for a Dornish princess. I was better suited for his son than him.” Daenerys shook her head. “I wonder how Viserys would have handled that. Me marrying Aegon instead of him. Though maybe Rhaegar wanted his son to marry Rhaenys. Or maybe he would’ve broke tradition and had him marry a lady from another house. It’s impossible to know now. It’s still interesting to think how different my life would have been as a true Targaryen princess.”

Jon nibbled on her neck as Daenerys considered the life that had never happened. When she finished he said, “Your brother sounds like a cun…” Jon stopped himself, thinking Daenerys wouldn’t appreciate the cursing or his harsh words for her brother. “…complicated man.”

Daenerys knew the king had blunted his words and clutched him a little tighter. Jon did moan at that. “Sometimes people questioned why I would name a dragon after Viserys. He was a horrid brother and a deeply flawed man. I often answered so that my dragon could be strong where he’d been weak, be the better version of him. That wasn’t all though. Viserys had his good side too. I remember he sold our mother’s crown to feed me when I was little. He suffered indignities his entire life to ensure our survival, earned his hated nickname as the beggar king even as he begged for everything we had. I occasionally wonder if any man could have suffered what he did without going a little mad.”

Jon pulled back, shaking his head, “He beat you. He put you down. He sold you for an army. He attempted to rape you. He was no brother. No real brother would ever do such things. We’re all flawed, aye. We make mistakes. Gods know I have, but the love should always shine through. I would never purposefully hurt Sansa or Arya. He never should have hurt you.”

Daenerys caressed her lord’s face again. “I wish you had been my family.”

“I kind of like what we have now.” He lightly thrust against her to further his point.

Daenerys chuckled. “That wouldn’t have been a problem in my family.”

“That attitude is why I am happy not to be a Targaryen.” Again Tyrion’s words popped into Jon’s head. The Hand of the Queen wanted him to become one in name. It still wasn’t something he was
Daenerys tied the robe tighter. The tent was warm, but not warm enough. She walked across to the table where her looking glass was kept to begin braiding her hair. She had taken to doing a more traditional northern single braid, but kept a few tendrils to give the appearance of a crown. She also knew her hair had to be kept tight to stay hidden under her cloak as they rode.

Though she thought a little pointless, with the armies and the dragons who else could she be?

Jon shifted under the furs on the bed and she smiled at him. She knew she should wake him so he could sneak out, but he looked so peaceful. It was rare to see Jon Snow without the weight of the world on his shoulders and she wanted to give him just a few more moments of rest from his responsibilities.

Besides, she had worn him out the previous night.

She smiled to herself as she began to work her hair. She had the mirror set up and used her comb to separate out the sections. She did the smaller braids first, pinning them up to resemble the crown she would wear soon. Then she braided the rest. It wasn’t until she picked up the mirror to check her work that she noticed that she was no longer alone. She’d nearly dropped the mirror in surprise. She whipped around, grabbing the knife left on the table the night before to face the unexpected guest.

How in the seven hells had a creature that large managed to make no noise?

Daenerys gripped the knife tightly as she looked at the large white wolf with its strange red eyes. She’d never seen a wolf so large. Though she really had never seen a wolf, but she knew they weren’t supposed to come to her height.

Then she remembered – this was a direwolf. A white wolf.

Daenerys put the knife down, finally remembering what Jon had told her about his direwolf Ghost. She knew that’s who was staring at her in her tent. She called out in a soft voice, “Jon.”

Jon had been excited for her to meet his closest friend, but she also had been told the stories of how vicious this beast could be. She didn’t want to be mistaken for an enemy.

Daenerys remembered when Jon had met Drogon. She decided to copy his behavior, holding out a (admittedly steadier) hand for the wolf to sniff. Ghost took a step forward, sniffing the offered hand. He took a few more steps forward, lowering his head. Daenerys dropped her hand, clutching the table behind her in fear.

But Ghost merely began to nuzzle her stomach. Daenerys relaxed, smiling. She brought a hand to stroke the wolf. “Hello Ghost.”

He seemed to recognize his name, continuing to rub his head against her, his eyes closed from the pleasure of her petting.
She wasn’t sure how long it lasted, but it ended when Jon stirred on the bed. Ghost whipped away from her to pad over to his master. The wolf climbed onto the bed and crawled up to lick Jon on the face.

Jon’s voice was deep with sleep, “Dany, what are you…” His eyes opened and he smiled. “Ghost.” He began to pet him. “What are you doing here, boy?”

Daenerys sat at the edge of the bed to give them room, smiling at them both. “It seems someone missed you.”

Jon’s head bent around his massive wolf’s form to look at Daenerys. “I’m guessing you’ve met then?”

Daenerys’ hand reached out to scratch his backside. “We have. It went well, I think.” Ghost’s head turned to look at her. He looked happy enough with her motions, Daenerys thought.

Jon grinned. Daenerys wasn’t sure she’d ever seen him look so unabashedly happy. Daenerys returned the smile, happy to see him happy, “You must have missed your pet.”

“Ghost isn’t a pet. He’s more than that. He’s like an extension of myself, if that makes any sense.”

Daenerys did understand. It was a lot like her and her dragons. She noticed the mud on the white paws now on her bed. “Should he be on the furniture?” She didn’t want to break up the reunion, but well, she didn’t mud on her bed either.

“Off, Ghost,” Jon commanded. The direwolf made his way off the bed. Jon sat up, the sheet falling down and exposing his chest. Daenerys’ eyes went over his perfect body and his imperfect scars.

Jon must not have missed her look, as he grabbed her, bringing her closer. Daenerys squealed in a very unqueenlike way. He kissed her. Daenerys pulled back with a laugh. She glanced over to see red eyes watching. It unsettled her some, “Jon, your direwolf,” she tried for an excuse.

“Ghost, go stand watch outside.” The wolf left. Daenerys shook her head even as Jon brought her back in for another kiss, his hand moving to grasp her rump.

She pulled back, shaking her head again, “We’re supposed to be keeping us low profile. Your direwolf outside my tent is not that.”

“So you’re saying you want him back in here?”

Daenerys laughed, lightly hitting her lover on chest. “Get up, Lord Snow.” She swung her legs off of him on onto the cold floor, missing his warmth immediately. She still walked away from him to check if he’d messed up her hair. “We have a long march ahead of us today and no one else is going to move until the queen and king do.”

Jon’s head fell back into the pillow with a groan. Daenerys smiled, wondering if Jon just wasn’t a morning person.

It felt nice, Daenerys thought. Spending a morning together almost like a regular couple, it felt lovely.

She already knew how deeply she would miss such things in the coming dark days.
With Ghost back, Jon felt like a piece of home had been restored. Winterfell felt so close even though he knew they had at least a week before they would return there despite their hard marching these past few days. Jon mostly rode for the journey, but occasionally he would walk for stretches to at least make an effort to show them they were all in this together, regardless of titles.

Tyrion had warned him against it. “It’s good to get close to the men, but you also have to order them. They still need to see you as above them.”

Jon understood what the man had been saying, but it didn’t stop him. He split his marching time between walking with some of the White Harbor men and the queen’s Unsullied. He still worried that her army would struggle with the cold.

Spending time with them, he realized the problem with the Unsullied and the cold wasn’t going to be them complaining about it like the southern Night’s Watch men had done. It would be the exact opposite. They would say nothing even as their toes turned black and fell off in an effort to please their queen.

That level of devotion that Daenerys’ men had for her scared Jon sometimes.

He walked beside Ghost today, happy to have his friend back. Grey Worm was on his other side, he noticed the commander kept looking at the huge wolf. Unlike most, the glances showed no fear. Just curiosity. Jon wouldn’t call Grey Worm a friend, but they had developed a bit of a rapport, so he asked, “Have you ever seen a direwolf before?”

“No,” Grey Worm responded. His eyes snapped forward.

Jon didn’t know what he wanted to ask, and he knew Grey Worm would say nothing. It was both something that Jon liked about conversing with Grey Worm and hated. There was never any artifice or unneeded words with the commander. But since Jon wasn’t much of a talker either, most of their conversations petered out into nothing quickly.

So Jon was surprised when Grey Worm asked, “He is yours?”

“Yes,” Jon answered.

Grey Worm nodded. He looked straight ahead and said, “I had a puppy once.”

“Did you?” Jon was surprised. He didn’t picture a lot of pets in the Unsullied.

“Yes. I was given one to care for when I was cut. She was a good dog. Learned tricks fast.” Jon had never seen any emotion from Grey Worm, but for a split second he thought he saw a grimace. “A year later, this one was given the order to kill it. I strangled her. She died well.”

Jon nearly stopped in his absolute surprise. He understood that the Unsullied had been slaves, trained from birth to be the perfect soldiers. He knew that horrible things had happened during that training. But ultimately, slavery was an abstract concept to him, as it had been outlawed in Westeros long before his birth. He’d heard how Daenerys had ended slavery in Slaver’s Bay, sacking three cities and freeing thousands. He knew that was a good thing, but it was still abstract to him. Only now did he see it for the amazing thing it was. He looked at Grey Worm. This man and all of the rest of the men of the Unsullied would fight and die for Daenerys, without hesitation or question, and now Jon completely understood that devotion.

Jon looked at Daenerys now, looking like some other worldly warrior queen on her horse, who was
hunched over whispering with Missandei. They kept glancing in the direction of him and Grey Worm. When they noticed his look upon them, the fully grown women started to giggle like Sansa did with her friends years ago.

Jon remembered Sam’s complaint when they’d first joined the Night’s Watch, about missing girls and their giggles. Jon hadn’t missed that, girls giggling when he passed by with Robb and Theon had always made him feel self-conscious as a boy, but it was kind of nice now. A little normalcy in the insanity. The world may be ending, but girls still giggled together over the boys they liked.

“Why do they do that?” Grey Worm was looking in the direction of his queen and her advisor now.

“Giggle? Because they like us, I think,” Jon shrugged.

“But why do they giggle?” Grey Worm insisted.

Jon shook his head. “No idea.” Grey Worm looked so confused and concerned. “I don’t understand women either, Grey Worm.” Jon glanced over at the women again. Both looked lovely and happy. It warmed Jon’s heart to see Daenerys like that. “I don’t think men were ever meant to understand.”

Grey Worm shook his head. They marched side-by-side in silence.

Ghost’s ears perked, his head shooting to their left. It took a few moments before Jon heard it too.

Grey Worm said, “Get on your horse, Lord Snow. The Dothraki do not honor any man who walks.”

Jon did as he was told, swinging up onto his nearby stead, but still asked, “What about you and your men?”

“The Unsullied are the only infantry army to beat back a Dothraki charge. We don’t need horses for respect.”

Jon knew some things about the lands across the seas, but the more time he spent with these foreigners and the Dragon Queen, the more he realized how little he really did know. He didn’t their stories and histories well, even though he could give detailed histories of all the northern houses of Westeros. He marveled at the foreign tongues Dany and Missandei knew. He’d made friends with the Free Folk, but they weren’t so different from what he’d always known.

The noise grew now, it sounded like thunder but on the ground. Jon’s head turned to watch. He was amazed when he saw the horse lords come over the horizon.

Jon had never seen the Dothraki horde, not properly.

He’d never seen them in a full charge, screaming. He felt his breath catch at the sight and looked back at the northern men.

They all looked as nervous as he felt, many of them had their weapons out ready to defend themselves against the men coming upon them. Jon’s attention shifted to the Unsullied. They didn’t react, didn’t flinch at the show of intimidation. The horde didn’t appear to be slowing as they charged towards them. Jon glanced to his queen, wondering if she was planning to do anything about her army overtaking the rest of them.

She stood still, watching her Dothraki with pride.

The horde stopped just feet from the rest of them, they still cheered and yelled. Jon saw that it did
little to comfort the northern army. The boys and men still looked ready to panic.

Daenerys guided her horse forward. Jon followed her out a bit, but stayed with the army. His instinct was to protect her, but he knew she wouldn’t need it against her own men.

The Dragon Queen yelled out to her bloodriders. Jon couldn’t understand the words, but he understood the emotion behind them. He glanced over to Missandei who was translating for Grey Worm, who passed the words on to his own army.

From the looks of determination both armies were now wearing, Jon guessed the words were quite inspiring. The northern men, who also didn’t understand what she was saying, still seemed to understand from her tones that it was an inspiring call to arms.

She ended with a shout and the entire Dothraki began chanting, “Khaleesi!” The Unsullied joined in, banging their spears against the frozen ground. To top it all, Drogon swooped down just a few feet above them.

Jon glanced back at the northern men again. How could they not be in awe of this woman like he was? How could they not see how her men followed her into battle?

How could they not all love her?

The wind went over and under his wings, making him weightless as he rushed toward the enemy. He had to know everything, Jon would be arriving the following day and the king would need to know the location of the Night King and his army so they could begin their battle plans immediately. Bran had watched the Wall fall, and he had been following the Night King’s movements as best he could. But it was difficult. The Night King’s powers were strong.

The ravens spread out as they approached where Bran anticipated the army of walkers. But he saw nothing. He shifted to another flock. Then another. He couldn’t find the army.

Then he saw it. The army moved slowly across the snow. Some of the bodies too decrepit to move fast though Bran had seen their speed. He watched the White Walkers on their undead horses move their wights along. Heading…somewhere.

But where was the Night King? With his new dragon mount, Bran knew he could be anywhere.

He searched. A dragon couldn’t be too hard to find.

After what may have been hours or days, Bran returned to Winterfell, under the Godswood tree. He had to find their enemy. He looked at the red leaves hanging above. Fewer of them now that winter was here. Bran had never seen a true winter. He wondered if the tree would become bare or if the magic protected it from such a fate.

Bran could hear the noise of the courtyard not too long away. He had no desire to watch others prepare for the fight ahead of them. He was a cripple. The only work he could do was here under this tree.

Bran took the branch again, he would check on the Dreadfort and Last Hearth again. To see if the strongholds were preparing as well.
He found the Night King at Last Hearth. He saw Meera keeping her family behind her as she stared down an undead dragon. She looked terrified.

Bran didn’t understand. The Night King made no moves to hurt anyone, just threatened. It was unlike him. The raven went back to where the army was. Bran couldn’t tell where it was, but guessed it was marching to Last Hearth to join its king.

But why? Why was the Night King waiting? He and his dragon could take out most of the keep by themselves.

Then Bran understood. The king’s goal was to expand his army as well as terrify. Killing with a dragon would make the bodies unusable in his army. He intended to keep them hostage until his army could arrive. Then he would kill them all.

Bran returned to Winterfell. He had to find Sansa. Jon would need to know. They were out of time.
Archmaester Ebrose read the scroll again, its words worrying. The message from Bran Stark had been easy to put aside. Samwell Tarly’s warnings and worries had made him realize that perhaps there was some danger beyond the wall. But it couldn’t be as dire as the young man thought. The young often didn’t understand how to measure importance. They didn’t have the experience to know what truly was urgent and what could wait. Everything seemed a problem of monumental importance to them.

But for a king to request help? That was something else entirely.

Who was this king though? The last Jon Snow Ebrose had heard of was the one Samwell Tarly had claimed was the new Lord Commander. A man doesn’t go from being Lord Commander to King in the North, so the archmaester knew it couldn’t be the same man. And Jon Snow was a common enough northern name.

But the mention of the Targaryen queen and her dragons pledging to help in this fight, abandoning her claim to the throne. Ebrose knew of Daenerys Targaryen. He'd always guessed the escaped Targaryens would return to Westeros and enact their revenge. He’d said as much when he first heard of their escape during Robert’s Rebellion. He had read enough histories to know that leaving the Mad King’s children alive would be a mistake Robert Baratheon would pay for.

Though it hadn’t been the Targaryens that had ended the Baratheon line. Mostly, it had been the stags themselves that had caused their own end.

He read the words again. The note implored the maesters to search through the histories to find a way to defeat the White Walkers, specifically it asked them to find how the first men and the children of the forest had defeated them the first time around.

It was one of the oddest requests he’d ever received. What king concerned himself with legends? Ebrose could only think of one.

The last royal who’d petitioned the Citadel for anything had been Rhaegar Targaryen who, through his great uncle, had asked for all of the information available on Azor Ahai. But that had made a certain kind of sense, the Crown Prince asking about the legends of the Prince who was Promised.

This was something else.

The other maesters on the conclave dismissed this note as easily as the last one, claiming that there was no longer a King in the North and this Jon Snow was clearly another pretender. But Ebrose said, “Skepticism is a good thing. No true wise man ever believed something he was told just because someone said it. But there comes a point where skepticism turns to foolishness.” He held up the scroll in his hands. “This note claims that Eastwatch has fallen. The wall has fallen. The wall that has stood for a thousand years through all of wars and winters and despair.”

“The wall has fallen,” another archmaester snorted dismissively. “On the word of a false king allied with a false queen.”

Ebrose nodded. “Perhaps, but perhaps not.” He stood. “I think this may be an important point in history, gentlemen. I don’t know that the Long Night is truly upon us, but I know this – the men in
this room may be called fools by history in how we respond to this note. Either we’ll be fools for responding to it, spending months looking for solutions to a problem that isn’t real. Or we’ll be fools for not assisting the realm in its time of greatest need.” Ebrose looked around the room. “I know what kind of fool I’d rather be. I will be looking for a way to defeat the White Walkers of legend and instructing my students to do the same. You men may decide for yourselves what kind of fools you’d prefer to be.”

Winterfell. Jon recognized the land when they were still miles away. He could have sworn he could tell when the air had changed to that of his home. He breathed easier, happy to be home. Now just an hour or so away from seeing his family again.

Arya. Bran. He wondered just how different they would be, but he didn’t really care. He just wanted to see them again, confirm with his own eyes that they were alive. Bran had looked half-dead the last time he’d seen him. No one had been sure that we would live when Jon had said his good-bye.

Then Catelyn Stark had forced him out of the room. He still remembered her toxic words and hateful look. “It should have been you.”

Jon tried to push the memory away. But found he couldn’t. It should have been him. He should be dead. Robb should be leading the North, as was his right, or maybe now that Bran was back he could take over. Even Sansa was more of a Stark than him. She should have been Queen in the North. She had always been the better choice than a bastard.

“Jon,” Daenerys voice broke him away from his spiraling thoughts. He looked to her. Her eyes were locked on something in the distance in the direction of Winterfell. “Who are those riders?”

Jon looked. He recognized one of the riders easily enough, “It’s Brienne of Tarth.” He was less certain about the identity of the other rider. “And her squire, I think.”

Tyrion strode up, “Podrick Payne.” Jon looked at the smaller man, who had a fond smile on his face. Jon wondered just how Tyrion Lannister knew Brienne of Tarth’s squire, but then he knew the lady knight had a sorted history with the Lannister family despite her loyalty to the Starks.

The knight and squire rode up to the now stopped party. Part of Jon was annoyed to be stopped so close to home, wondering why his sister would send out riders in advance of their arrival.

They’d all been in the Dragon Pit, but Jon made formal introductions any way. Plus from the awe-struck look on the young man’s face, Jon remembered that the squire had left before the Dragon Queen arrived. Jon hoped he’d hidden his own thoughts from her better during their first meeting than the squire, who was clearly smitten.

He could tell from Daenerys’ look she was used to such looks. “What brings you here, my Lady?”

Brienne’s face looked like she’d swallowed something sour at her title of lady. But she said, “The Lady of Winterfell requested for me to share with you which families were at Winterfell presently. Brief you as much as I can. She thought it would be good to call a war meeting within the hour of your arrival, and this should make such a thing possible.”

That’s smart, but then that was Sansa. “Of course.” Jon signaled to the men of White Harbor to
begin moving again. “We can talk as we ride.”

Brienne nodded. Podrick, instead of following his knight, moved to ride next to Tyrion. Brienne looked over the massive army following them. She looked confused, “I thought the Lannister army was to join us? I don’t see their colors.”

Jon, unsure of why she asked, explained, “They are riding up separately. Last we spoke they should be here in a week or so.”

She nodded, seeming a little embarrassed now. Still, she recovered quickly, “We have representatives from all the Stark bannermen except Lord Manderly who came with you. Lady Stark has built barracks to station the men who came with them in the mostly abandoned Winter Town.”

“Where is Lady Stark planning to have my men camp?” Daenerys asked.

Brienne seemed surprised by the question. Jon wasn’t sure if it was because it was a military question or if the knight was just surprised that the queen was speaking to her at all. Still, she answered, “Lady Stark has cleared out some space for them to camp. She thought the Dothraki should probably be stationed away from Winter Town while the Unsullied could act as a buffer.”

Daenerys didn’t look pleased at Brienne’s words but nodded.

“Have we received word from Last Hearth or Dreadfort?”

“Yes,” Brienne replied. She didn’t seem eager to say any more than that.

“And?” Jon prompted.

“I believe Lady Stark wanted to speak with you herself on that.”

Jon felt the pit of dread build in his stomach. It couldn’t be good if Sansa didn’t want Jon to hear it from a messenger. They discussed other details and logistics as they rode. How the training was going. How food and supplies were being managed. How forging the dragonglass was coming along. What families were present and who they had sent as their representatives. If they’d sent any men with them and if so, how many.

When talk of the army stalled, Daenerys asked Brienne. “Brienne of Tarth, correct?” The lady knight nodded. “I’ve never been to Tarth what is it like?”

Brienne seemed taken aback by the question, but she answered, “It is an island surrounded by some of the bluest seas you’ve ever seen. Its nickname is the sapphire island because of it.”

Daenerys smiled, “When the wars end and I sit on the Iron Throne, I would like to see these blues seas. Would you be willing to escort me, Lady Brienne?”

Brienne nodded. She hesitated before adding, “I am not a lady, your grace.”

Daenerys smiled, Jon saw it wasn’t her true smile rather it was the soft one she used when trying to charm someone. “I was never much of a lady myself. Shall I call you Ser Brienne then?”

Brienne looked flustered at the title. “It wouldn’t be proper. I haven’t been knighted since being a member of Renly Baratheon’s Rainbow Guard.”

Daenerys questioned, “Rainbow Guard?”
“His kingsguard, your grace.”

Daenerys didn’t look impressed by the name. “There will be many opportunities to prove yourself in battle soon, I think. Perhaps I shall name you to my queensguard.”

Jon noticed a strange look pass on Brienne’s face, but he wasn’t sure if it mean she would want such a position or not. She answered, “That would be an honor, your grace.” She looked to Jon. “I had wanted to speak with Lord Manderly as well. Get his counts of men and see what supplies we can expect from White Harbor.”

Jon told her where the fat lord could be found, and she took off. He looked to Daenerys, checking if she wanted to speak about the new information, but her eyes were trained on Tyrion who was speaking with the squire, Podrick.

“So Podrick, have you been keeping yourself busy in Winterfell?”

“Aye, my lord. I have been helping with training for the upcoming battles.”

“And the whores of Winter Town? Have they come a begging outside the gates of Winterfell for a taste of your magic cock?”

Jon’s eyes widened as he looked at Tyrion and Podrick. The squire looked a little embarrassed but mostly amused, the Queen’s Hand looked entirely amused. Jon glanced at Daenerys, expecting to see her disapproving of Tyrion’s coarse language, instead she raised an eyebrow. “Magic?”

Tyrion responded to his queen, “Ah, yes. I once gave this man a pouch of gold and three whores, and they refused payment because he was so good.”

“Three at once?” Her eyebrow stayed raised. Her eyes racked the younger man from top to bottom. “Impressive.”

Hating the look on her face, Jon snapped, “Podrick, shouldn’t you be seeing to your lady knight?”

Podrick stuttered out, “Yes, my lord, I mean, your grace.” He took off in the direction Brienne had gone.

Daenerys laughed loudly. A rare sound. One Jon had never heard before. He was still a bit upset and somewhat embarrassed by his reaction to the squire but hearing that sound made him think it had been worth it. He would suffer almost anything to hear that beautiful sound more.

Arya was restless. She practiced moves with her blade, even took time to instruct some of the others practicing in the yard when she saw the need. Jon was arriving today. She had wanted to see her brother for so long, couldn’t contain her impatience to see him.

She had thought about sneaking out last night and greeting him on the road alone. But as she had prepared, Bran had voice had stopped her. “You don’t want to do that.”

Bran had spent almost all of his time under the godswood now. So she’d been surprised to find him in the courtyard looking up at the full moon. “What do you mean?”

“Wait for Jon to come here, Arya. You don’t want to visit him in camp.”
Arya wanted to question how Bran would know, but she’d seen the power of her brother’s visions. She stood there for a moment, no longer sure her action would be the correct one. Bran sighed, “Take me back to my room, Arya.”

She wheeled him to his chambers, her mind still debating on what to do. When they reached Bran’s “If you do go after him, Jon’s not going to be in his tent. You’ll have to wait for him there until morning comes. Then ride right back here.”

Arya didn’t understand. Where else would he be? She decided that maybe she didn’t want to know the answer to that. “I thought you could only see the past and present. How did you know what I planned to do?”

“You’re still my sister. I know how you think. I can predict what you’ll do.”

Arya had listened to Bran and stayed where she was. Waited for her brother to return to their home. Still, the waiting felt like agony now. He had to be so close.

She noticed that her dancing was getting sloppy, so she sheathed her sword and made for the gate. Arya looked out on the white landscape the armies would appear from. Her eyes focused on the skies more than the ground, as she figured she’d see the dragons before the men and horses on the ground.

Maybe she just desperately wanted to see the dragons.

She still couldn’t believe that dragons were real again. She longed to ride one into battle like the women in the stories she’d loved as a child, even though she knew it was impossible. Even seeing this Dragon Queen do it would be thrill, she thought.

The first dragon rider in a century, and it was a woman.

Arya hadn’t given too much thought of the Dragon Queen when she’d heard the rumors and gossip about her in Braavos. They’d had a much more positive view of her than the North did, but Arya wasn’t sure which side she thought was closer to the truth. She was trying to reserve her judgement until she actually met her.

But Jon liked her, that was almost enough for Arya. Sansa may not trust their brother’s judgement, but Arya did. He’d been her favorite growing up (despite the fact you weren’t supposed to have favorites), and his gift of Needle was still her most prized possession. She had missed him desperately in these past years.

She hoped he wouldn’t be disappointed in her. She’d changed so much. Would he reject the woman she’d become?

No. Not Jon. Jon had loved her when she was a terrible lady, encouraged her love of swords and arrows more than anyone else in her family. He would love her now too. He wouldn’t fear her as Sansa did. Wouldn’t look upon her with suspicion.

Something in the distance interrupted Arya’s thoughts. She could see something in the air. The shape almost looked like a bird, but the flight was wrong. It almost seemed like an overgrown bat, but still not quite right.

Arya’s eyes widened. It was a dragon. It had to be. She saw a second shape, smaller but similar to the first. Dragons. They were real. And they were coming here. To her home. To Winterfell.

Arya felt her chest expand with wonder and childlike excitement, the like of which she hadn’t felt
since the last time a royal party headed to Winterfell. But this felt like more. Because a few moments later, Arya spotted the dark long snake on the ground that was Jon and the armies he brought to fight the enemy to the north.

Jon. Jon was finally home. She would finally see him again.

Arya wasted no time in hopping down from the gate. Using all the grace and speed she’d gained over the years. She spotted Sansa making her way to the courtyard to greet their party. Arya silenced her steps and snuck up behind her sister, making her startle when she appeared out of seemingly nowhere.

“I hate it when you do that,” Sansa told her in a tone Arya was too familiar with. She grinned in response to her older sister’s annoyance. Sometimes it was nice to remember what their relationship had once been like.

Arya stood with her sister as a knight would. Part of her felt better than she had when they’d last greeted a royal party, no longer forced into a dress. But a deep sadness washed over her as well. Their family had been so much larger the last time. Her father, mother, Robb and Rickon gone now, Bran no longer the boy he’d been, leaving only her and her sister to represent Winterfell to the new monarch.

Then again, this time around one of the royal party she was greeting was the brother who wasn’t allowed to stand with his family the last time around. Something that Arya had never understood as a child and saw as even less fair now that she’d seen more of the world.

The horns blew announcing the imminent arrival of the Warden of the North returning home. The massive gate opened and in rode several people. Arya recognized most of them. The imp, the spider, Brienne of Tarth, Podrick, and there at the front beside a cloaked figure, her brother Jon.

He looked different than the boy of her memories. This Jon was scarred and carried himself with a confidence she never recalled him showing before. The Jon she’d known had always tried to disappear into the background. Never drew attention to himself to escape her mother’s angry gaze and to show he knew his place.

Arya thought she preferred this new man. Jon got off his horse and before greeting his family walked to the figure that must have been the queen. He held out a hand to help her off her horse. She ignored his hand, gracefully dismounting herself. It made Arya smirk. She compared this queen to the last she’d known, already liking this one better, riding on her own horse rather than arriving in a litter. Jon leaned into to whisper something to the queen, who responded in too low a voice for Arya to pick up on the words.

But she saw that there was no lie in Jon’s affection for this woman. This was more than a military alliance to him, he truly liked this queen. Arya filed that information away for later, to be examined more thoroughly.

The woman took Jon’s hand as he escorted her to his family. Sansa bowed, elegant as ever. Arya wanted to throw herself into Jon’s embrace as she saw his eyes look her way, an easy smile coming to his face, but she remembered herself, giving a knightly bow first.

Then she launched herself at her big brother. Jon’s laughter filled her ears as his arms came around her to hug back. “Arya,” he said. “You’ve become a woman.”

She gripped him tighter. “No more leaving,” she told him. “We stick together from now on.”
Jon set her down carefully. He looked over to Sansa, hugging her as well. They exchanged soft words Arya couldn’t hear. He looked around, “Where’s Bran?”

Sansa’s eyes connected with Arya’s. Arya knew her sister worried about how Jon would react to what Bran had become. So far, he’d mostly just frightened his siblings in their first meetings. They had decided together that Jon’s first meeting with their brother should be in private rather than in front of everyone. Sansa said, “He’s resting now, but he’s asked to see you later, Jon.”

Jon nodded. He held a hand out to the cloaked figure, “Sansa, Arya, allow me to present Queen Daenerys Targaryen.”

The queen brought down her hood. All of the paintings hadn’t been a lie. If anything they paled to the queen’s true beauty. She was dressed in a black outfit with a black fur cloak lined in red, looking every inch the Targaryen dragon. Her white hair was styled in a single braid, much like Sansa’s. Arya compared her again to Cersei and once again found the last queen lacking compared to this one.

Sansa spoke first, “It’s an honor to host you, your grace.”

Daenerys nodded. “It’s an honor to meet you and to be in your home. I have heard much about Winterfell and the women who reside in it.”

Arya couldn’t see a lie in the queen’s words, but knew there was something hidden behind the queen’s mask. The queen turned to her and Arya said to the queen, “Valar morghulis.”

All but the queen and the woman beside her looked confused at Arya’s words. The queen gave a small smile though and responded in the common tongue, “But we are not men.”

Arya smiled in response. It wasn’t the standard reply, but she thought she might the queen’s response better. The queen then asked, “How much time did you spend in Braavos?”

“Enough,” Arya responded cryptically.

The queen’s narrowed, but she gave nothing else away. “I spent some time there as well. I remember it fondly. But I am happy to be home now. Valar dohaeris.”

This queen wasn’t what Arya expected, but she thought she’d been right to trust Jon’s judgement. She glanced at her brother again, noting the twinkle in his eye at the queen speaking High Valyrian. Arya thought that something to be reexamined later as well. She remembered what Bran had told her about not finding Jon in his tent.

Could it be?

But no, as she had told Sansa, Jon wasn’t the type to fall for a pretty face. Beautiful as the queen was, Jon knew his duty and would always remain loyal to his family.

“Lady Stark,” the imp stepped forward now, speaking with Sansa. “It appears you’ve been quite busy.”

Sansa looked uneasy at the appearance of the Lannister. Arya’s spine straightened, ready to defend her sister if need be. She held no personal grudge against this man, but if he was a Lannister, he was her enemy. She would kill him with one word from her sister.

But Sansa pushed down her unease, looking cool again once more, “Winter is here.” She glanced at the pin on his tunic. “It appears you’ve been busy as well in our time apart.”
The dwarf smirked. “Yes, perhaps we can exchange stories about our time apart over some wine. I seem to remember you liking sweet red.”

“Do not be mistaken, Lord Lannister. Your watch has ended.”

Arya didn’t understand what that meant and a glance showed her that no one but Tyrion did either. He responded, “I know, but I thought we could both use a friend in these uncertain times.”

Sansa didn’t respond, but Arya could tell that her look had softened. She wondered just what the marriage between her sister and the dwarf had been like. Jon introduced the queen to the rest of the lords that had gathered, but he stopped at one, grinning and hugging him, “Sam. What are you doing here?”

The large man of the night’s watch blushed and seemed reluctant to say much to Jon. “The citadel wasn’t what I expected. I…well, I wanted to help you defeat the enemy. I was no use to you there, emptying bedpans and copying scrolls.”

Jon looked concerned. “I sent word there. Asking for help. I had addressed it to you.” He appeared lost in his thoughts for a moment before remembering his queen. “Your grace, this is Samwell Tarly. A brother of mine from the wall.”

Arya could hear the affection her brother held for this man, guessed the queen could as well. She seemed very uncomfortable with it though. She held out a hand to be bowed to. Samwell did his best, but it was barely passable as proper. The queen said tightly, “I was told that the Tarly house was no more.” Daenerys glanced at Tyrion, she didn’t look pleased.

“You haven’t heard…” Jon looked confused now as well. Daenerys looked to the king, Arya could tell the queen’s next words wouldn’t please Jon. The queen looked uncomfortable under the wide-eyed gaze of Samwell Tarly. “I was allied to House Tyrell. The Tarlys betrayed them to the Lannisters, ending House Tyrell for good. I met the Lannisters and their new allies on the battlefield. They lost. I gave your father and brother a choice: to bend the knee or die.”

Sam nodded, as if he knew what had happened next. “Were their bones sent home to my mother and sister?”

“There were no bones to send. Dragonfire turns everything to ash.”

The entire courtyard was staring at the Dragon Queen now, silent. Arya knew what the grumblings would be, “Mad King’s daughter.” She had been happy to meet this queen, but now she wondered if her first impression had been wrong. Was this queen just another mad Targaryen, burning those she saw as enemies? Only more terrifying now since she had real dragons rather than depending on wildfire.

The queen didn’t meet Jon’s eyes, who looked at her with a look Arya could best read as disappointment. He forced his look back to neutral quickly though, continuing to escort the queen as though nothing had happened.

But Arya could see it on the faces of all the northern lords. This Dragon Queen had just destroyed any chance they might have given her. They would not follow the Mad King’s daughter. The north remembered and would not forgive the past sins of the Targaryen line.
Sansa watched her brother try to recover from the queen’s confession, but she knew there was no point. The northern lords wouldn’t follow this queen. She only hoped they would still accept her help.

They would need it.

Sansa also knew that the northern lords would see this as a bad reflection on their king as well. Jon had been gone too long, leaving the lords anxious and angry. She knew as soon as Jon announced that he’d bent the knee, he would lose his support.

She was already planning on how she could stop that. They had to stand together against the enemy marching for them. The wall no longer provided the protection they needed, they needed to work together to stop them. She would have to force the northern lords to see this.

She just wasn’t sure how.

Introductions finished now, Jon ordered the dragonglass they’d brought with to be unloaded. Manderly’s men followed his orders and began the arduous task. Jon didn’t look pleased with the speed they moved at and turned to the queen. “Do any of your men speak the common tongue?”

Daenerys nodded, calling forth a man named Grey Worm. Sansa thought it a strange name. The Dragon Queen commanded for him and his men to assist with unloading the dragonglass before making their camp. The man nodded and within minutes another cart was being unloaded with an efficiency that put the northmen to shame.

It made them work faster. The scene pleased Sansa. Hopefully this would carry over to battle. One army making the other stronger. Jon’s eyes focused on the forge before looking to Sansa and then to the queen.

Sansa knew what her brother was asking.

Sansa needed to speak with Jon alone before they called their first war council, but as Lady of Winterfell, it fell onto her to host their royal guests, including taking them to their new lodgings.

Strangely, Arya had solved her problem by volunteering to escort the queen and her party to the rooms that had been prepared for them. It had surprised Sansa until she heard Arya asking the queen in an excited tone that Sansa felt like she hadn’t heard for a lifetime, “Is it true you ride a dragon into battle like your ancestors?”

It had made Jon smile, but it concerned Sansa. She hoped her sister wasn’t so easily placated by the foreign queen. One who apparently burned her enemies alive, just like Cersei had with the Tyrells.

Sansa would keep such thoughts to herself for now. She could tell from Jon’s look that he didn’t want to hear anything against the queen he’d chosen. Sansa worried for him. She had warned him not to be taken in by the woman’s looks, to remember that she was a conqueror who sacked cities and fed her enemies to her dragons.

But since when did Jon ever listen to her? He still saw her as his little sister. The proper one with silly dreams.
“So, give me a full report. How prepared are we?” Jon’s dark eyes met hers.

“As prepared as we can be. We’ve been training any able-bodied men and women as you directed. Our food stores are full, but we’re going to need more and soon with the queen’s armies here now.” Sansa looked up. The skies were empty but she knew the dragons were nearby. “And meat for her dragons.” She wondered how much a dragon ate. She guessed quite a bit.

Jon smirked, “And how are you coming with a sword? I can’t picture it.”

“I haven’t had time,” Sansa confessed.

Jon looked slightly disappointed, but didn’t comment. “I want to talk with the smiths.”

She knew he meant it as a dismissal, but she walked with him. She still hadn’t told him what Bran had seen. Sansa couldn’t quite bring herself to say it yet though, “What do you need to speak with the smiths about?”

“I need to make sure they know how to make weapons for the Unsullied and Dothraki. We no longer have a longsword army.”

Sansa frowned. She’d heard tales about the Dothraki during her time in King’s Landing. How they were savages who raped and enslaved their enemies. She knew they needed help, but still she held mixed feelings about how who was camped outside of her home now.

But she had to trust Jon.

“Jon, Arya and Bran are different now.”

“So you’ve said,” Jon’s attention wasn’t focused on her. His eyes following the training he could see then to the men unloading the dragonglass he’d returned with as they walked to the forges.

It annoyed Sansa. Jon was here now but just barely. “Jon,” she said firmly. And his eyes came back to her. “Arya has a store of faces. Human faces that she wears to kill people. She’s an assassin. And Bran,” Sansa thought about her first meeting with Bran and the painful memory he’d used to prove himself to her. “Bran is no longer our brother, but the three-eyed raven.”

“Okay,” Jon’s face was stoic and Sansa wasn’t sure if he believed her or not. “What’s a three-eyed raven?”

“He sees things through the eyes of his army of ravens. He can see what happens now and what’s happened in the past.”

“So he’s like a warg?”

Sansa didn’t know that word, but nodded anyway. She was surprised by how easily her brother accepted what she told him about his long lost siblings. “You believe me then?”

“Sansa, we live in a world where the dead march and dragons fly again. There’s not much I don’t believe these days. Besides, you already said as much in your messages.”

He moved to begin walking again, but Sansa stopped him, grabbing his arm. “About that,” Sansa hesitated, but only for a moment. “Bran says that the Night King has raised a dragon. That he rides him as his mount now. He’s currently keeping Last Hearth hostage with the dead dragon while his army marches to kill them.”
Jon’s eyes widened. They shifted to worry looking towards the castle. “Fuck,” he let slip out. “So that’s how the wall fell.” His face looked pained. “Fuck,” he swore again, angrier this time.

Her brother’s coarse language sometimes took Sansa aback. Her father had been so careful never to swear around her or Arya. Robb had done the same. Sansa had spent as little time as possible with Jon when they were younger, so she wasn’t sure if he had always been less disciplined about his language or if he’d changed over the years.

Jon’s eyes glanced in the direction where the queen and her party had gone. “I’m going to have to tell Daenerys. It’ll upset her.”

“Daenerys?” Sansa questioned.

Jon looked annoyed, he began walking again. “Something you want to say?”

There was a lot Sansa wanted to say. How could Jon bend the knee to this queen? Just how close had they’d grown that he was apparently on first name basis with her? Just what was the nature of their alliance? She said none of that, “There’s something else you should know.” She heard Jon inhale, preparing himself for more devastating news. “Lord Baelish is dead. I had him executed for crimes against our family.”

Jon didn’t ask questions or break stride. “Good,” he said darkly.

They said nothing else as they entered the forge. Sansa made a daily visit to be sure that everything was going smoothly, but she hated the heat. It didn’t seem to bother Jon as much. He appeared to be looking for someone in particular. Sansa saw the smile on her brother’s face when he saw he found who he was looking for. “Gendry!” he called out.

The man who stepped over to them was a new smith. He’d come from the wall. Sansa remembered that he’d been the one who had told her about the quest to find the wight for Cersei. Jon had sent him here to help with building weapons. She hadn’t known they were close, but she guessed battle did that with men. Made them closer in less time than usually needed.

Remembering that story reminded Sansa that the Dragon Queen had saved them in that mission. She’d sacrificed one of her dragons to save Jon and his men. Sansa wasn’t sure it was worth it now that the Night King rode it, but she was extremely grateful that Jon was still alive and back in Winterfell. She would have struggled without him. Sansa realized that this queen, there was more to her than Cersei perhaps. Arya was right, she should keep an open mind. Jon wouldn’t trust a woman like Cersei. He had better judgement then that.

But still, she had also seen how Jon looked at the Dragon Queen. He certainly noticed the queen’s beauty. Enough that Sansa doubted a political marriage would be a burden for him.

Jon asked Gendry, “How is the forging coming?”

“Good, we were going to be finished with all the dragonglass you sent up previously by week’s end, so your timing is perfect.”

Jon nodded. “I’m going to need you to forge more than knifes and longswords now. The Unsullied primarily use spears and short swords and the Dothraki use curved blades. Can you forge those?”

Gendry nodded. “Spears and short swords should be easy enough, but I may need some help with the Dothraki weapons.”

“I suspected as much. I’ll send Missandei with a couple of the queen’s bloodriders after the war
council meets. They should be able to help you."

“Missandei?” Sansa asked.

“The queen’s scribe,” Jon explained. “She’s an excellent translator. As far as I know, none of the
Dothraki speak the common tongue.”

Sansa frowned. They would be going into battle with soldiers who didn’t even speak the same
language. She foresaw the added confusion this would create on the battlefield. She asked Jon,
“How do you plan to command men on the battlefield who don’t understand what you’re saying?”

“The queen speaks Dothraki,” Jon answered, as if that answered everything.

“But she’ll be riding her dragon, right? You’ll be the commander on the ground. How do you plan
to command them when you don’t speak the same language?”

Jon sighed. “Sansa…”

Sansa continued, “Her other army speaks Valyrian. Another language you don’t speak.”

Annoyed, Jon replied, “Well, apparently Arya speaks Valyrian now. Maybe she can translate for
me.”

“Arya?” Gendry spoke up. “Arya Stark? She’s alive? Is she here at Winterfell?”

Sansa was surprised at the interruption and saw that Jon was as well. His eyes narrowed on his
friend. “How do you know my little sister?”

Gendry looked a bit sheepish. “We traveled together on the Kingsroad.”

“We spent all that time together.” Jon said, his voice cool now. “On the boat, at the wall, beyond
the wall, and at no point did you think to mention that you knew my little sister?”

“I kind of forgot she was your sister.” Gendry shrugged.

“Did you?” Jon gave Gendry the same look Sansa had often seen him give Lord Baelish. She was
almost amused by how uncomfortable the smith grew under the stare.

Sansa decided to rescue the poor man. “Jon, the war council will be meeting soon. If you want any
time to yourself, you should take it now.”

Jon nodded. “Right.” He strode out of the forge and Sansa followed.

Alone in his room, Jon tried to relax and take a moment to enjoy being home again. But his
thoughts wouldn’t allow him that simple pleasure. He drank deep of his favorite ale that had been
left out for him, he guessed on Sansa’s orders. His sister always had been considerate.

The wall was down. The Night King rode a dragon now.

Daenerys would be horrified. Jon knew the idea of having to kill her child once more would break
her heart. She hadn’t yet recovered from the loss, to put this on top of that grief. Jon knew it would
be too much. He didn’t look forward to telling her.

He also wasn’t sure how they should handle the news. Did he want her to take her dragon and try to save the people of Last Hearth or did he want to advise against it? They couldn’t afford to lose another dragon. In a single fight, it was uncertain who would win.

Jon remembered the small boy he pardoned – the young Lord of Last Hearth, Ned Ember. Named after his father. He couldn’t leave the boy to his fate, but he didn’t want to send his army on a suicide mission either. They couldn’t afford to build the Night King’s army for him.

He thought of who was in Winterfell, maybe a smaller party? Was there some way to sneak them out of Last Hearth? Most keeps had escape tunnels in case of a siege. Even the Night King and his dragon couldn’t be everywhere at once.

Right?

That brought him back to his first problem. He knew Daenerys wouldn’t take the news of her raised dragon well. She would act irrationally. He knew she deserved to know, knew he had to tell his allies, but he didn’t want to hurt her. Didn’t want to see the pain in her eyes at the thought of her undead child.

He finally fully understood Tyrion’s worries. He was the war commander, but he didn’t want to share important information because it would hurt the woman he loved. His feelings were already compromising his duty and they hadn’t really even begun the war yet.

Jon refused to be a coward. Sansa had told him that Bran wanted to speak with him about something as soon as he was able, but as much as Jon wanted to see his little brother, it would have to wait. He took a drink and marched out to see his queen.

“That could have gone better,” Tyrion said.

Daenerys said nothing in return. She knew her Hand was right. People only got the chance to make a first impression once and she may have just ruined her reputation in the north before even having a chance to build it. But what was she to do? She wouldn’t flinch from what she’d done. Right or wrong, she had made her decision and would face any consequences from it. She couldn’t afford to look weak or indecisive.

“Yes,” she agreed. “But it can’t be helped now.” She looked around the room that would be hers for the foreseeable future. It was nice enough. Not the luxurious accommodations she’d had in Meereen, but oddly warmer than her chambers in Dragonstone. The great fireplace had already been lit when she first entered. She stood near it, wanting to place her hands directly into the flames.

She hadn’t liked hurting the soft man – Samwell Tarly. Took no pleasure in crushing the happiness she’d seen in his eyes in seeing her for the first time.

In seeing his friend Jon returned to the North. That thought made her stomach turn more than anything. She had no idea that Jon had any personal connection to House Tarly, never would have guessed it. Even though he’d mentioned it once earlier, she had hoped he’d been over exaggerating the friendship. Really she should have known better. She hadn’t dared to look at him after her
announcement, couldn’t bear to see the same look of horror she’d seen in the other northern lords’ eyes in Jon’s as well.

“No, I guess not,” Tyrion agreed. Still, Daenerys heard all that her Hand didn’t say. I had told you to show mercy. I told you that you should have locked them away. But she wouldn’t regret her actions. She had said she would kill any man that didn’t kneel before her. What kind of queen would she be if she didn’t follow through on her threats?

If she looked back, she would be lost.

“A war council this soon after our arrival means there must be new, urgent information. Otherwise, Lady Sansa would have waited a day. Held the polite feast tonight to greet you and gave you a day to get settle.”

“You know her, don’t you?” Daenerys asked. “The Lady of Winterfell.”

Tyrion hesitated. “I don’t know how well. We were married in King’s Landing, but it was a sham marriage. Unconsummated and no longer in effect.”

“But you hold some affection for her,” Daenerys had observed. She faced her Hand. “We haven’t really discussed what you will want in return for your position as my Hand beyond your vineyard.”

“My vineyard?” he questioned.

Daenerys remembered she hadn’t discussed it with him. “Ah yes, Missandei mentioned it. I will see it done.” She smiled, “I hope I may partake in the first batch of the Imp’s Delight.”

“Of course, your grace,” Tyrion agreed. His eyes sparkled in gratitude.

It pleased Daenerys to see it. She continued, “But what else is it that you will want? Are you interested in the Stark girl? I can enforce the marriage if you wish.”

“Lord Snow would not be pleased by such a decision,” Tyrion pointed out.

Daenerys knew that, but “Lord Snow is Warden of the North. I am Queen. He will follow my commands.”

“I thought you wanted to break the wheel, arranging and forcing political marriages, selling off girls like cattle isn’t like you. You hated it when it was done to you.”

“Sansa Stark is no girl, but I see your point,” Daenerys agreed. She wasn’t sure she would have done it any way. But she was trying to better understand her Hand. She thought she had the full measure of him, but he had surprised her with his not quite buried loyalty to his family here in Westeros. She knew she had his loyalty, but she still felt the need to test it.

Daenerys wished she could trust better, but she’d suffered too much betrayal from those she thought honest and loyal. She let it drop. “How do you foresee this meeting going?”

Tyrion replied, “You need to play up your compassionate side a bit more. They see you as just another iteration of your father right now. You need to show them all that you are more than that. That you are better than that.”

Daenerys agreed with his assessment, but she still said, “I want to be kind, but I can’t afford to look weak.”
“I don’t think any of the northern lords sees you as weak right now.”

“They always see women as weak,” Daenerys replied bitterly.

“You’ve come to save the North, not conquer it.” Tyrion repeated her words back to her.

Daenerys nodded. “What about Jon? Do we announce that he’s bent the knee now or do we wait?”

Tyrion sighed, “I thought about letting him tell his lords in his own time. Which knowing his complete inability to lie will be sooner rather than later.”

A small smile crossed Daenerys face, thinking of what had happened at the Dragonpit. Funny, that she thought it amusing now, when at the time, it had infuriated her. A knock on the door pulled her from her thoughts. Guessing it was Missandei, she called out, “Come in.”

It was not Missandei. Instead Jon Snow entered to the surprise of both her and Tyrion. Jon immediately explained, “I have news. I thought you should hear it from me before the meeting.”

Daenerys looked to Tyrion who looked as nervous as she felt. This couldn’t be good news. She did her best to put aside her worry and asked, “What is it?”

Jon swallowed be taking a step towards her. She could see the sympathy in his dark eyes. “It’s Viserion. The Night King resurrected him. He rides the dragon into battle now.”

Daenerys felt her knees give out, having just enough presence of mind to fall into the nearby chair. Her hands wrapped around her waist, as if she could hold in all the emotions that overwhelmed her. She breathed in deeply, her eyes rapidly blinking as she tried not to cry, not to collapse, not to show weakness.

Jon strode forward, kneeling before her, and taking her hand. She lost herself in his gaze for a moment. She expected mixed feelings when she saw him next, considering what she’d done to his friend. But there was nothing but sympathy and the always present love.

Her hand grasped his more tightly. She was so grateful to have found this man, couldn’t imagine facing the Long Night with anyone else. For the first time in her life, she felt like she truly wasn’t alone.

Tyrion cleared his throat, bringing both Daenerys and Jon back to themselves. Daenerys searched for words. “Lord Tyrion, could you see about…”

Tyrion understood. “I think there’s something in my room I need to see to.” He looked at the slightly embarrassed Jon. “Thank you for telling us ahead of time, Lord Snow.”

Jon gave a curt nod, but didn’t look at her Hand. Tyrion left without a fuss. As soon as the door closed, Daenerys took Jon’s other hand forcing him to stand up so she could wrap both her arms him.

He picked her up, holding her more tightly, he sat on her bed, comforting her in a way Daenerys cherished. She let the tears escape, feeling safe in his arms. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, Daenerys. If anyone is to blame, it’s me.”

Leave it to Jon to blame himself for everything. “No, I’ve done so much wrong in my life. This is my punishment.”
“Daenerys…” Jon tried to stop her.

“I killed your friend’s family. I felt nothing while I did it.”

Jon swallowed again, but still held her tight. “It’s like you said, sometimes power is terrible.”

She clutched him tighter, burying her head into his leathers. “I don’t deserve you,” she whispered into his chest.

Daenerys heard the quick exhale that almost could be a laugh. “I’m a bastard and you’re a queen. If one of us is reaching for more than they deserve, I don’t think it’s you.”

She pulled back to look at him. He had that melancholy look that was too familiar on his face. She held his face in her hands as he did the same with hers, his thumbs wiping away her tears. “You are so much greater than your birth, Jon Snow. Damn anyone who ever told you otherwise.”

Jon said nothing, but he leaned in, kissing her softly. Daenerys responded desperately, clutching to him once more.

After a few moments, Jon tore himself away, “No. There’s no time for that now. We have to meet with the war council.”

Daenerys, not content to let him go just yet, “Tonight?”

Jon looked at her, searching her eyes for something. He nodded. “Yes, my room is down the hall. Third door on the left from here.”

Daenerys kissed him once more, a promise, before letting him go. He seemed just as reluctant to let her go, but their duties called.

Tyrion didn’t feel welcome here as he entered the great hall of Winterfell with his queen and the rest of her small council. He knew the queen probably felt it worse. Every eye was on them, not one of them friendly. Grey Worm and her Dothraki guards glared back just as fiercely. Off to a good start, Tyrion thought.

The lords had already gathered and the Starks were seated at the head table. Tyrion sat to the right of his queen at the high table. She sat to the right of the King in the North. They were already looking like a royal couple.

Tyrion wasn’t sure if the sight pleased him or not. He hadn’t liked being dismissed early so that the queen could cry in her king’s arms. He only hoped that was all that had happened, but really didn’t want to know what had happened behind the closed door.

He’d waited outside though, and if had gone further, it had been quick. And when Jon exited, he didn’t look like a man who’d just had a quick tumble.

Not that it mattered. He’d visited the queen’s cabin once back on the ship, it smelled like sex. Tyrion avoided it after that.

He glanced at the young lovers once more, they may have looked like a royal couple, but looking outward at the northern lords meant that they were not gazing lovingly at each other. It was one
small mercy.

Jon stood, bringing the attention to him, the hall fell silent. He announced, “My lords, I thank you for traveling to Winterfell. You know the enemy we face. You know the threat we must face. I have returned with the dragonglass I promised to get, that we will use to defeat the white walkers. And with allies. Cersei Lannister has pledged to send her forces north to aid us.” Tyrion noticed the grumbles at that, understanding the Lannister name was not believed in the North. He shifted in his seat again. Jon turned to look at Daenerys, “And Queen Daenerys Targaryen, who brings 97,000 Dothraki warriors and 7,500 Unsullied soldiers.”

“As savages and eunuchs,” a Hornwood lord, Tyrion thought. His eyes connected with Tyrion’s. “And even worse, Lannisters.”

Jon held up his hands to stop the agreements. “It doesn’t matter. Foreigners, wildlings, Lannisters, Starks, none of that matters any more. The only two sides are that of the living and that of the dead. We must fight. We must fight together. The North must stop this threat, we must work together to save ourselves and the rest of the realm. The Wall has fallen. Our lands have been invaded by an enemy not seen since the First Men. We will be the heroes they sing of for the next generation if we win or all will fall to darkness if we fail. We must not fail.”

Tyrion was impressed. He never thought Jon Snow had much of a talent with words, but watching his impassioned speech, he was beginning to understand why these tough men of the north would choose the white wolf for their leader. It was more than just the Stark blood in his veins.

Jon settled back down, speaking in a much calmer tone now, “We have new information. The Night King is at Last Hearth.” The room went quiet. Jon hesitated before finishing, “He rides a fallen dragon.”

The room erupted, accusing faces looking to his queen now. Tyrion could sense the shift in the room. The northern lords would attack Daenerys, assign her the blame, but Jon stopped it before it could start, “We don’t fully understand the Night King and his powers, but I know this. There are no safe spots left. We have to fight him. We have to do it together. All we have to decide now is how.”

To Tyrion’s surprise the statement worked and the northern lords quieted. Then one called out, “We must not let Last Hearth fall. No more northerners should die. We’ve lost too much already.”

Bangs on tables showed the others’ agreement on that statement. Their king hesitated to agree though. Smart, thought Tyrion. It might not be worth the cost to save less than 200 people currently in the keep. Then Jon proceeded to ruin Tyrion’s esteem for him, “I agree. We have to help our people in Last Hearth, but I don’t know that marching our entire force is the way to do it.”

“How else do we beat a dragon?”

“We have to be smart. A small party may be more effective.”

“But the Dragon Queen will be going with, right? With her dragons?”

Jon’s face tensed, Tyrion knew it was because the young man wasn’t going to let his lady love anywhere near the Night King if he could help it. He wondered how the northmen interpreted the look. Jon answered, “We cannot risk the dragons.”

One of the northern lords stood, “So how are you planning on defeating this undead dragon, your grace? History tells us that a dragon can defeat a dragon.”
Jon glanced at Daenerys, again Tyrion understood the look. Jon didn’t mean to have Daenerys fight.

Tyrion nearly snorted at the thought. This king didn’t know his queen well enough. She wouldn’t be sitting back and letting the menfolk take care of everything for her. “We need to explore all of our options before deciding how to bring down the Night King’s dragon.”

“We don’t need to,” the lord took a step forward. “We already know. We know how to kill dragons and we don’t need to discuss it. If the little queen you brought is too chicken to fight perhaps she should just go back south again.”

Daenerys chose this moment to speak, “Forgive me, Lord…?”

“Lord Cley Cerwyn,” the northern lord replied.

Daenerys smiled. “Lord Cerwyn, I am just a young woman and still new to the ways of the North. I never received a formal education, but if I remember my history correctly, the Dance of the Dragons, which you refer to, decimated the dragon population. To the point where people believed that dragons would never return to their former glory or return at all after what remained wasted away in the dragon pit. So if history followed the same lessons learned from that event, we may bring down the Night King’s dragon but at the cost of my two remaining children. We would face the army of the dead, an army with a weakness to fire, without any dragons. Just men who could fall and join the ranks of our enemy. And your suggestion is to not even consider other options before we follow that plan?” The man looked uncomfortable under the stare of the queen and everyone else. The queen forced a response, “Do I have that correct, Lord Cerwyn?”

“We don’t have time to sit around debating. The army of the dead marches for us and ours right now!”

“No, we don’t. That’s why lords and ladies have kings and queens to decide on plans. You may sit, sir.”

The lord’s face soured but he obeyed. Tyrion noted the face to remember. The man may prove to be an enemy after this. He glanced at Daenerys, had he not advised her to soften her image at this meeting?

Jon stepped in, “If the queen flies in with her dragons, the Night King will see her coming. He could flee or ambush her, or any number things could go wrong. A small group of skilled warriors may be able to escape his notice however, and evacuate the keep. I have already assigned a man to look through Winterfell’s books for a secret way in and out of Last Hearth.”

Tyrion thought it a good plan. Though he’d heard it told that Winterfell’s library had pretty much been burned during the Bolton occupation. He spoke up, “If any of you fine gentlemen are familiar Last Hearth, a guide would be most helpful in this mission.”

One – man would be generous, the boy didn’t look like he could yet grow hair to shave off – stepped forward. “Aye, I know the keep well. I could lead your group to it.”

Jon nodded at the boy, who seemed pleased to help his king. Tyrion was glad he hadn’t insisted that Jon announce he’d bent the knee just yet. These men chose their king for a reason, and northmen were known for their loyalty.

Whether or not they deserved such a reputation, Tyrion sometimes doubted. Starks aside, these lords could be a fickle bunch.
Jon chose a group of men to undertake this mission. It was discussed whether or not Dothraki or Unsullied be included, but it was ruled out as they were still new to the North’s harsh climate.

As for the rest of the army, the northern lords and their king debated what to do as they waited for dragonglass weapons to finish. Jon wanted to start incorporating the queen’s armies with the Westerosi ones, having the different fighting units learn from each other. The northern lords, predictably did not like these plans.

Tyrion stayed out of that fight. It wasn’t a bad idea, but the north lords didn’t seem like they were going to budge on it and he didn’t feel the need to waste his energy convincing him. He’d need it for when it was time to get the North to surrender to their queen. Let Jon bang his head against the wall.

It wasn’t until the conversation turned to the plan of how they were going to use their army that Tyrion started paying attention again. The northern lords favored setting up entrenchments around Winterfell and letting the army come to them.

Tyrion said, “I have a better plan.”

Jon and the queen looked to him. They appeared to be the only ones in the room who were interested in what he had to say. “If the Night King is away, perhaps we should be looking to destroy his army now. Send the dragons not to Last Hearth, but to where his unguarded army is. If the Night King has a dragon, we should attack them while he’s away. It’s our best chance.”

“We don’t know exactly where the army is,” Sansa admitted.

Tyrion swallowed his frustration. “What’s the point of having an all seeing three-eyed raven if he can’t see the 100,000 strong army we’re supposed to be fighting?”

“Are you blaming this on Bran?” Sansa glared at her former husband.

Tyrion knew the answer to that. “No, I’m merely saying there must be some way of getting a hint of where they are.” Tyrion looked at the empty spot at the high table where he assumed the boy usually sat. “Perhaps if we spoke with your three-eyed raven…”

Sansa shook her head, “Bran isn’t to be disturbed right now.”

Tyrion’s fist clenched and he swallowed his frustration. Gods, he could use some wine right about now. Even the crappy grape juice northerners called wine would do.

“Besides,” Jon said. “We won’t be able to supply our entire army in such a short timeframe, even if we run the forges constantly.”

“The North is equipped, you have over 10,000 swords and daggers forged.”

“I’m not sending all of our northern forces at once, alone.”

Jon’s tone told Tyrion that was the end of that argument.

When the meeting finished, which for Daenerys felt like hours later, she rose carefully. She hadn’t said much, wanting to follow her advisor’s words, but she knew it wasn’t perfect. She attempted to
always voice her concerns for the smallfolk, try to show the northerners that she did care, but she doubted it had worked.

The North didn’t care about words. They were lost to the wind. Her actions would define her to them.

She watched men file out of the room. She glanced over to see Jon speaking with his sisters, the younger one, Arya, was clearly eager to spend time with her brother. It made Daenerys remember how she’d seen her brother when they’d been much younger.

How sour that had grown.

She decided to leave the family to their reunion, exiting the room to return to her chambers. Jorah followed her, acting as her bodyguard once more. She had missed her knight on the journey to Winterfell. It seemed like he’d come back to her to just keep being separated for her again.

But she had understood when he requested to ride with the Dothraki. While he didn’t seem to loathe Jon the way he had Daario, it was too much to ask him to watch her be in love. She knew it hurt him, but she couldn’t help how she felt. She would never see him as more than a dear friend.

And Jon, Jon was beginning to mean more to her than anyone ever had. It was a love that frightened her in intensity. It seemed like more than love, even walking away from him now hurt her. Despite the fact, he was happily spending time with his family and he’d earned such happiness, she just wanted to be with him, always.

She feared such feelings would make her weak. Daenerys didn’t want Tyrion’s worst worries to come true. They couldn’t afford to lose this war just because the queen had somehow turned into some clingy, needy girl.

Daenerys thought of her eldest brother. No wonder Rhaegar had spent months uninvolved with the rebellion, hiding out in his “Tower of Joy.” Daenerys kept thinking about doing the same thing.

But she would not repeat her family’s mistakes. She would not let love rule her like it had Rhaegar. She would not let madness infect her thoughts as it had her father. She would not let her control turn to cruelty as it had for Viserys. She would rise above the remains of her family’s past to build a better world.

Daenerys noticed a young girl who stood at the hall, glaring at her and her knight. Daenerys stopped, smiling to her. “Hello,” she said, bending a little to meet the child’s face evenly.

The girl’s scowl showed how unimpressed she was by the mythical Dragon Queen. “You didn’t say much in that meeting. Have you bent the knee to my king?”

The words surprised Daenerys so much her spine straightened on instinct. “What? No.”

“The King in the North is the only king I know. I don’t care about your armies and your dragons. When this fight is over, you’d best leave the North alone. We’ve had enough of southern rulers and their wars.”

Daenerys blinked. Who in the hells was this little girl? Then she remembered what Jon and Davos had told her about the northern lords. Remembered them speaking of a northern lady who was the fiercest of them all. Her eyes narrowed, “Lyanna Mormont, of Bear Island?”

Daenerys felt Jorah stiffen behind her. “You’re Maege’s daughter?”
The little lady looked to the knight, still appearing unimpressed, “Did you know my lady mother?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Daenerys saw Jorah looked uncomfortable. “She was my kin.”

Lyanna’s look soured further and she looked at the knight properly. “Why do you wear a bear sigil on your armor?”

“I am Jorah Mormont.”

“The traitor. The son who brought dishonor on our great and noble house.” The lady turned back to the queen. “You shame us all by bringing him here with you. You allow such scum in your ranks?”

Jon had told Daenerys about the fierce young bear, but she realized Jon had still fell short in describing the force of nature that was Lyanna Mormont.

But Daenerys had never been one to back down from a challenge. “Lord Mormont has sinned, but he has worked hard to restore his honor. I believe in second chances.”

The young lady eyed Daenerys in a way that made her uncomfortable in a way she hadn’t felt in years. Like she wasn’t quite measuring up to a close scrutiny. “You’ve spent your life in warm lands. You know nothing of the toughness of the women in the north.”

“In warm lands, yes, but not in comfort, my lady. I spent my entire life being hunted. It made me as strong as any northern woman.”

“I will be the judge of that.”

“Judge away,” Daenerys’ chin lifted. “I have no doubt I will measure up to even your high standards, Lady Mormont.”

Something passed across the girl’s eyes, almost looking like a fleeting respect. “Maybe my king was right to bring you here to fight with us.”

She gave a quick nod to the queen and another glare to her kinsmen before leaving them. The queen took a deep breath. She had known she wouldn’t win the North over easily, but it was beginning to feel like an impossible task.

Daenerys looked to Jorah, who brooded. “Have the young lady’s words upset you, my friend?”

“Yes,” he said honestly. “But it was to be expected.” He looked around at the stone walls that surrounded them. “It’s strange to be home again. I wanted it for so long, but now that I’m here, I feel lost.”

“Did you visit Winterfell often?”

“No, but I have been here a few times. The first time I was just a boy and Rickon Stark presided over the hall. I played swords with his boys. I protested when my lord father commanded me. Telling him I was too old to play with children. But he insisted. Telling me that young Brandon would be my lord someday and I should build a relationship with my lord liege early.”

Daenerys guessed at the complicated emotions of the memory, knowing that one of those boys grew up to be the man that sentenced Jorah to death. Jorah continued, “Brandon Stark was massive, even as a child, and he knew how to use it to his advantage. Fighting against him was like fighting a brick wall. He was easy to hit and outwit, but his strength was hard to beat down.”
“Did you beat him?”

“Of course not. I still fought with honor then. You didn’t beat your lord liege’s heir. Ned refused to fight after watching our match. He knew I had lost on purpose and said he had no intention in participating in a farce.” Jorah shook his head. “So damn honorable, even then.”

Daenerys considered the picture of Jon’s father that Jorah painted. It seemed Jon truly was the exact image of his lord father as she’d been told so often before.

They arrived at her chambers, Daenerys moved to go in, but Jorah stopped her. “My queen, with what happened today, earlier in the courtyard, with Samwell Tarly.”

Daenerys took a shaky breath. This was the last thing she wanted to speak of now. But she prompted, “Yes?”

Jorah dipped his head, “Samwell Tarly cured me of greyscale. He’s a good man. I know you had your reasons for punishing his family, but it might go a long way in restoring your image if you show the last living son kindness.”

Daenerys nodded, considering her oldest friend’s words.

Sam spent most of his days in Winterfell in the library, bent over the books still left in the keep as well as the ones he’d stolen, looking for any kind of solution to the great problem facing them.

He had decided against returning to Castle Black now. There was no point watching a wall that guarded against nothing. He’d heard that the Lady of Winterfell had ordered the men of the night’s watch to pull back the forces they had. Edd would have listened, seeing the wisdom in the command.

Sam wondered if he would ever see his brothers again.

A noise interrupted his thoughts, the door opening. It was rare for anyone to come in here, so Sam looked up, expecting maybe Gilly. Little Sam was walking now, or more accurately running all over Winterfell, so she wasn’t able to spend as much time with him now. He wasn’t expecting her until dinner. He guessed more time had passed than he’d thought. He looked up expecting the woman he loved.

Instead he found the Dragon Queen.

Sam jumped to his feet. “Y-y-your grace,” he stammered. He may have been raised a lord’s son, but he felt completely unaware of how to act in the face of royalty.

The queen regarded him coolly, walking over to him, glancing at the books spread out in front of him. She looked at some of the titles, her delicate fingers tracing some of the embossed words.

Finally she spoke, “I understand I have you to thank for returning Jorah Mormont to me.”

Sam wasn’t sure how to address this queen. He wasn’t sure how he felt about her, wasn’t sure how she’d feel about Jon’s true parentage. He’d admired her once, reading about her deeds across the sea to Maester Aemon. He looked away from her and nodded. “Aye.” He wasn’t brave, but he still
said, “Burning the other men in my family seems an odd way to show your gratitude.”

She looked sharply at him, and Sam wished he could take the words back. He wanted to cower, but some part of him made him stand his ground. That same part that allowed him to kill a White Walker in defense of Gilly. She moved her hand away and said, “Queens do not make apologies. Your family betrayed the Tyrells, a house they were pledged to and warred against me. I offered them a chance at mercy and they refused it.”

Sam said nothing. He had no reason to suspect anything the queen said was untrue. He knew his father’s pride better than she did, understood his brother’s honor. They wouldn’t have kneeled before her, not even under threat of dragonfire. It might have made him proud but all he could think was how foolish it had been. How sad his mother and sister must be now.

She seemed to fidget a bit. “I also understand that you are the King in the North’s best friend.”

Sam’s face contorted. He was still getting used to Jon’s new title. Then he thought of what Jon’s true title was, Crown Prince of Westeros. But what did Jon have to do with it? The queen continued, “I make no apology because I have done nothing wrong. But because of me, you are now the last male Tarly. I will release you from your vows to the Night’s Watch if you wish and allow you to be Lord of Horn Hill as your father was before you.”

Sam’s eyes widened. His father would have faced a thousand dragons before ever allowing such a thing to happen. He couldn’t believe it actually was happening. He thought of Gilly and little Sam. He would be able to provide for them after all, be a family with them.

“Lord Tarly,” The queen’s voice shook Sam from his thoughts. “Do you accept?”

“Aye, yes.” Sam shook his head. He attempted to bow, but he never had mastered any grace. The queen seemed to accept it nevertheless. Before she could leave, Sam asked, “Did Jon put you up to this?”

Her eyes narrowed at him, and Sam gulped. “The King in the North does not command me, Lord Tarly. I do as I please.”

Sam nodded, “I just…Jon’s always looked out for me. This just feels like him. That’s all.”

The queen seemed to soften. Sam wondered about that. Jon had made fast friends with the men of the Night’s Watch, even as he made enemies, but why would he cause such a reaction from the Dragon Queen? Sam wondered if she somehow knew Jon was her family. Maybe Bran had talked to them already. But wouldn’t his claim to the throne threaten hers? Wouldn’t she be angry with him?

“Your king is a good man, Lord Tarly. He protects his friends and his people. I try to do the same.”

Sam nodded again, letting the Dragon Queen leave. He remembered the devotion Ser Jorah showed the queen. His own feelings about her were still complicated, but he could see how she could inspire devotion. She had shown his father and brother her unforgiving cruelty, but Sam had received her generosity.

He put these thoughts and feelings aside, wanting to find Gilly and tell her what had happened.
Jon entered the area of the godswood after spending time with his sisters and dining with his people and immediately felt a sense of peace and calm fill him. He’d retreated here often as a child, when he was feeling lonely or unwanted. It was often his father who discovered him, the only other person who spent a significant amount of time in the peaceful place. Once, when Jon had been feeling brave, he’d asked his father why he spent time in the place connected to the old gods.

“You may not understand until you get older, Jon. But the responsibilities men carry weigh them down. This is the one place I can come to make them feel lighter. It reminds me that there are other things larger than my cares.”

Jon understood all too well now. His responsibilities were even greater than his lord father’s and it was pleasant to feel them lift, if just a little, if just for a moment. He breathed in deeply and felt the presence of the old gods.

He walked towards the white tree and as Sansa and Arya had said, Jon saw Bran sitting there in his wheeled chair, grasping onto the trunk with his eyes rolled back and white.

Jon had seen a warg before, but it was still unsettling to see Bran using such skills.

Jon sat under the branches of the tree, waiting. He inhaled deeply. He was happy to be home. He’d spent most of his life here and still felt he’d spent too much time away from it. He thought about his plans after talking with his brother. He was planning to check on Daenerys. Officially, to see how she was settling in and checking if she was comfortable like any good host would.

Unofficially, to fulfill the promise he’d made earlier. He’d been a fool to think he could stay away from her now, just because he was in Winterfell and it might be dangerous to show his true feelings for the queen. Winterfell was his home, if it was safe anywhere, it was safe here.

Before his thoughts could get too carried away, Bran returned to reality. Jon smiled and stood, stepping forward to embrace his brother. “Bran…”

“Jon,” Bran’s emotionless voice stopped Jon in his tracks. He knew Bran had changed. Both Sansa and Arya had warned him of the change. Still, it was jarring to see for himself. He stood back, regarding his younger brother. Looking for some trace of the young boy he’d left behind when he left for the wall.

He found nothing human there, just the three-eyed raven Bran called himself now. It unsettled Jon. Arya and Sansa had changed too, they all had, but this was beyond that.

“I have something to tell you,” Bran said.

“Okay,” Jon said, unsure of what Bran was about to say, but he felt a strong sense of foreboding. Like it may be a better idea if he ran away now, never heard what Bran wanted to say to him. Something in his gut tightened. “Do you have more news about the Night King?”

“No. It’s about your mother.”

Jon immediately felt annoyed even as the lonely boy in him leapt in curiosity. What did that matter now? He shook his head, “Bran, that secret died with our father.”

“Eddard Stark was not your father.”

It was like all the air had been sucked out of the space, despite being them outside. Jon’s brain struggled to process this information, rejecting it as completely wrong. It went against everything Jon knew. Everything he had built himself to be. He was Ned Stark’s bastard. It was an identity
that took him a long time to accept, but he did now. To be told that it was a lie was not something he would accept. “No,” he said softly. Then more firmly, “No. Of course he was my father. Everyone says I have the Stark look.”

“Your looks come from your mother. You are the son of Lyanna Stark and Rhaegar Taragayn. Trueborn, in fact, and the rightful heir to the Iron Throne. Your true name is Aegon Targaryen.”

Jon felt his legs give. No. No. None of that was right. He was Ned Stark’s bastard. He certainly wasn’t a fucking dragon like Daenerys. Daenerys…

Tears leapt to his eyes before he could stop them. Daenerys. He couldn’t be her…he had to think about it for a moment…her nephew. No. She was a beautiful stranger to him. The queen he’d grown to respect and follow. The woman he loved.

He loved her. Why were the gods so cruel? To give him so much only to rip it away again. “No. None of that is right, Bran. You are wrong. I am the son of Ned Stark and some woman.” The rumors Jon had always tried to ignore, but secretly spent so much time thinking about flew to him. “Ashara Dayne, maybe. She was said to have the Targaryen eyes. You’re wrong, Bran.”

“I’ve seen it.” Bran went on to explain it all. He told Jon about the visions he’d seen. Ned at Jon’s birth, his promise to Lyanna, Lyanna and Rhaegar’s secret marriage, his true father’s last word as he died. Jon just listened to it all numbly. His mind swirled, unable to settle on any one thought for long. He thought of his sisters…cousins, how would they react? He was still their family, but perhaps not in their pack anymore. He wasn’t their brother, not by blood. “You share my blood,” Ned Stark had always said to him. Jon could only see the deceit in the words now. The truth hidden within them. It was only when Bran mentioned that Samwell Tarly had connected dots on the annulment that Jon’s head shot up, “Sam? Sam knows?”

“Yes. You should talk to him. He has the proof you’ll need. You’ll need to rule, Aegon Targaryen.”

Jon looked at his brother, looked for any compassion, any sympathy. But Bran said nothing more. Eventually he turned away from Jon and touched the trunk of the weirwood tree again, returning to his visions once more.

Who was this? Jon couldn’t believe his brother would destroy his entire world and then just leave. Not even a word of sympathy. Who was this stranger before him?

Jon sat there for a moment. His brain going over all this new information. Ned Stark – his honorable…uncle – had lied to him his entire life. Jon understood it was to protect him, but it had been a cruelty to be a bastard, to be the one smudge on the honor of Ned Stark. Jon had spent his entire life living a lie. And he’d been raised to despise lies.

He wasn’t sure how long he sat there, wasn’t sure how many tears he actually silently dropped, but eventually he stood on shaky legs.

He had to find Sam.

“I is it true?”
Sam had been surprised when Jon had turned up in the library, more disheveled than Sam ever remembered seeing him before. His eyes were red and his hair out of its usual bun. Sam didn’t need to ask what Jon was talking about. “Bran told you.” He looked down. “I should have been there too. It might have been easier for you.” Bran wasn’t exactly good at human interaction these days.

Jon didn’t seem hear him. “Is it true, Sam?”

“Aye,” Sam sat down, hoping Jon would sit as well. But instead the young king began to pace, much like an agitated wolf. Sam offered, “I can show you the book with the proof, if you like.”

“I don’t give a fuck about the book.”

Jon had not spoken so harshly to Sam since Sam’s first days on the wall. It made him curl up a little. He remembered how weak he’d been, and he could feel that same weakness creep back in. “Jon…”

“There’s nothing you can say to make this better, Sam. Not unless you tell me this is all some cruel joke.”

“It’s no joke.”

“Yes it is.” Jon snapped at him. “My entire life has been one cruel joke played by the gods. I thought maybe the army of the dead was their final punchline, but no, that wasn’t enough for them. They had to destroy everything good in my life.” Jon stopped ranting, taking a deep breath. Sam could almost see the anger leaving his friend, only despair left behind. His voice was soft now. “She’s going to hate me.” Jon sat down, his head falling to his hands. “She’s going to hate me, and gods help me, I still want her.”

Sam was completely confused by his friend’s words. It had been such a sharp turn. “She?” he asked. Did Jon mean one of his sisters? They loved him. They would still love him even when they learned the truth. Jon had to know that.

Jon didn’t seem inclined to explain, still clutching his head. And Sam wondered briefly if he was crying. He’d never seen Jon cry before. Had always thought Jon was the perfect kind of man according to his father, who was too strong to ever breakdown and show emotion. But then where had that gotten the former Lord Tarly? Killed by a queen and her dragon. Sam didn’t judge his friend. He could never look down on Jon. His entire world had been changed. A man was allowed to react to that. “Jon?”

The king didn’t lift his head. “Who am I now? I have always been Jon Snow, bastard of Winterfell, illegitimate son of Ned Stark. My entire life has been a lie. A lie told by a man I thought my honest father.”

Sam didn’t know how to begin comforting his former brother. Couldn’t find any of the right words. So he sat next to Jon, giving him all the time he needed. Sam still wondered who she was, but he guessed it didn’t matter right now.

Jon snapped up. “I’m in love with my fucking aunt, Sam. I’ve spent the entire trip up here screwing her brains out every chance I got. I was hoping to get her pregnant so I could marry her.”

Whatever Sam had been expecting, that wasn’t it. No wonder Jon was so broken up by the news, not only was his entire life in question, he just became a rival to the throne against…his aunt. Sam’s eyes widened at the revelation when he understood what exactly his friend was telling him.

Jon’s eyes met his and he added firmly, “You cannot tell anybody about this.”
He wondered if Jon meant he couldn’t tell about what Jon had just said about the queen or if he meant his parentage. Probably both. “What are you going to do?”

“Tonight, I think I’ll get drunk enough to forget the last hour of my life. After that…” Jon shrugged.

Sam looked to the door. He hoped Gilly had went to bed. Jon probably wouldn’t appreciate her presence, regardless if Sam assured him that she would never say anything. He thought about what Jon said. “I’ll get us some ale. Wait here.”

A shadow of a smile appeared on Jon’s face, which comforted Sam. After he’d done so much for him, Sam was happy to be able to help his friend now. He checked on Gilly and found her sleeping. He kissed her forehead and she stirred. “Coming to bed?”

“No it’ll be a late night for me. Go back to sleep.”

She nodded in her sleep and went back to her slumber.

Sam went to the kitchens next, grabbing as much ale as he could carry before getting back to Jon. The king had taken off his heavy furs and was lying back on a bench looking at the ceiling. He sat back up as Sam approached. He handed Jon a drink, which he accepted gratefully. He began drinking immediately, and looking at what he’d brought, Sam estimated it wouldn’t be an hour before he had to make a second trip for more ale.

Sam had his own drink, studying his friend. Jon looked a little better now, but clearly he wasn’t fine, as he was drinking faster than Sam had ever seen someone go. It didn’t take long for Jon to move on to his second. Sam glanced around the empty library. It probably wouldn’t be good for the King in the North to be caught in his cups.

“Maybe we should move to your room, don’t want anyone popping in.”

“We can’t. Dany knows where my room is. I made sure of that.” He snorted.

Dany? Sam wanted to question more about that time Jon said he spent screwing her brains out. Or why that would matter. “Why does it matter if the Dragon Queen knows where you sleep?”

Jon swallowed slowly before answering, “You’re not usually so slow, Sam. She could be in there right now. Probably not dressed for the winter weather.”

Sam blushed, trying not to picture it. He loved Gilly, but a man would have to be blind not to have noticed the queen’s beauty. “I never was much of ladies’ man.”

Jon chuckled. “Me neither. Look at us now. You’re practically married and I’m hiding from the mother of dragons.”

Sam remembered again when he’d first heard about the Dragon Queen, reading Maester Aemon’s messages. He thought she sounded like quite a woman then. Hoping to distract him from his self-pity, Sam asked Jon, “What’s she like, the queen?”

“She’s…” Jon shook his head, not finding the words. “She’s not like anyone I’ve ever known before.”

“But you’ve loved before.”

“It’s different.”
“How?”

Jon lowered his drink. “I’m still not a bleeding poet, Sam.”

Sam smiled at the memory. Jon tried to put it into words, “I loved Ygritte because she just so completely lived in the moment. Never took anything too seriously, never let me take myself too seriously. It killed me to hurt her.” He paused, letting that pain pass. “Dany is nothing like her. I think Ygritte would have actually hated her. Daenerys Stormborn is a queen. She does amazing, impossible things. A goddess living among us mortals. Someone to be worshipped. And yet, I’ve seen her as just a lonely young woman who’s been broken before with only her dragons for family. Do you know how humbling it is to see the vulnerable side of a living legend?” Jon took a drink. “The love is the same but it’s also different. Daenerys makes me feel like I’m not alone in this world. I was never this obsessed before. I can feel something pulling me to her, always, and sometimes…” Jon stopped, before finishing quietly. “Sometimes I think the world could burn as long as I had her. I think of this fight ahead of us, and I just want to take her, get on one of her dragons and just run. Forget my duty and our people and just take off.”

Sam felt the weight of his king’s confession. Knew Jon didn’t say such a thing lightly. He was slightly terrified of just where Jon’s mind was right now.

Jon chuckled now, his voice on the edge of hysteria. “Maybe I am a bloody Targaryen, because I’m trying to force myself to care about the blood we share, but I just want to keep fucking her like nothing’s changed. If anything, it just supports that there’s some other-worldly connection between us.”

He shook his head and went back to drinking. Sam was stunned by his confession but knew Jon needed to feel a connection right now. Needed to feel something other than whatever darkness was consuming him. So Sam made his own confession, “I feel that way sometimes too.” Sam said, gaining Jon’s full attention. Sam explained, “With Gilly. I just want her and little Sam safe, and I don’t really care about the rest of the world. Even people I do care about, even with the duties I have, I just want Gilly and Sam safe above everything else.”

“Maester Aemon tried to explain that to me once. I didn’t understand then. Thought my father…” Jon’s brow furrowed. “Thought Ned Stark would never do such a thing. But he did. He sacrificed his honor and confessed to crimes he didn’t commit to save his daughters.” Jon thought for a moment then added. “Told the world he’d sired a bastard and accepted his wife’s hatred to protect me from his best friend.”

It wasn’t quite understanding, but it was a step in the right direction. Sam didn’t think Jon was quite ready for that conversation though. He had never thought about it before but if Jon was a Targaryen, that meant he’d been related to Maester Aemon. “I miss the old maester sometimes. He was so wise.”

“Me too. I wonder what he would have to say about me being his long lost family.”

“It would make him happy, I think. He liked you. I think he would have been happy to have you as family.”

Jon’s eyes closed. “I have to tell them. Daenerys, Arya and Sansa. I don’t know how, but they deserve to know. But I don’t want it to become public knowledge. I just want to remain Ned Stark’s bastard to everyone else.”

Sam almost wanted to just let it pass, but he knew it had to be said. “You’re heir to the Iron Throne, Jon, you can’t just…”
“I don’t want the fucking throne. I didn’t even want to be King in the North.”

“Yet you are King in the North. It was your duty and you’re doing it. The Iron Throne is your birthright. And you’d be a fantastic king. It’s your duty, Jon.”

“I forsook all my titles when I took the black cloak. I lost my birthright when I did that. The King in the North, that happened in my second life.”

It was a smart solution. Sam was actually impressed. But it seemed wrong. Jon hadn’t known what he’d been giving up when he took the black. Surely that mattered? Sam would say nothing more about it for now. Even if he thought it a mistake, it was his friend’s mistake to make.

They drank and talked late into the night, catching up on each other’s lives. Jon told him about how their brothers had betrayed him and how he’d become King in the North. Sam told Jon about the last time he’d seen his family and his disappointment with life at the Citadel.

Jon looked at the beautiful woman in his bed. He wanted to climb in next to her, wrap his arms around her and pretend everything he’d learned was a lie. He knew he loved her, knew he didn’t want this to end just because of who his birth parents were.

But he also knew it was more complicated than that. He knew Daenerys would see his potential claim as a threat, even though he didn’t want it. He’d seen it in Sam’s eyes, seen it in Bran’s, he knew a lot of people would look at him with the same expectation. They would think he deserved to be king more than she did queen. Would want him to claim his birthright.

Jon’s hand reached for her, touching the silk strands of her hair, hoping not to wake her. She was so beautiful.

It was selfish, he knew. But he didn’t want to tell her, not yet. Wanted to hold on just a little while longer, and he knew if he stayed in his room with her, he wouldn’t be able to hide the truth. So he left. Ghost followed, but he ordered his wolf back to the room, so that Daenerys wouldn’t be completely alone.

It was still dark out, but the light on the horizon was just starting to change colors. Jon wandered around Winterfell, realizing that he couldn’t stay here. Too many loaded memories. As he walked the keep that had been his home and only saw one lie after another.

There was where he and his not brother had gotten into their first real fight, throwing down their swords and using fists against each other. There was where his not father had showed him how to ride a horse. There was where he and his not sister had conspired to play a prank on his other not sister.

It was too painful. Jon couldn’t breathe, couldn’t spend one more minute in the home he’d been desperate to get back to for months.

He saddled his horse and rode off to rescue Last Hearth. Alone.

Chapter End Notes
Just a warning that the next chapter is not half-written the way the last couple have been (though oddly enough 7 is, damn action sequences, just not my strong suit), it's just a rough outline, so I apologize in advance if the next update takes a bit longer.

Thank you everyone for the kudos and comments! They help keep me motivated and work through trickier writing parts.
The Long Night Begins

Chapter Notes

So I pulled a Martin with this one and had to split this chapter into two since I wrote too much (a rare problem for me). That, and the plot showed up half way through writing it (a common problem for me). I figured out a good stopping point and should have enough plot for two chapters. Hope you all wanted more instead of less because that’s what you’re getting.

Theon owed his sister a lot. He knew that. She’d tried to save him from Ramsey Snow. She had saved him from himself after the ordeal, helping find Theon Greyjoy again after spending so long as Reek. And when she’d needed him, when her fleet burned because of their uncle – what had he done?

He fled, like the coward he was. He’d spent his life in Winterfell bragging about the Ironborn and talking about his people with pride, but he wasn’t fit to be one. He’d never been one.

He hadn’t the honor to be a Stark either.

But he would do this. He could do this one thing. Rescue his sister. He would make his father proud, both of them.

The salt of the sea whipped on his face, and Theon’s blood was comforted by the smell and feel of it. His people always fared best on water. He’d learned that lesson in the hardest way possible. His crew, though small, was made up of Yara’s followers, some of the best warriors and sailors the Iron Islands had to offer. While his uncle may have had more men, ships and strength, Theon had speed. He’d caught up to his uncle quickly enough.

Euron had traveled the seas for years; there were many places he could have stashed Yara, but Theon knew his uncle’s threat of killing her wasn’t an empty one. Yara Greyjoy was Euron’s biggest threat. She was the only one who could really contest his rule. Theon guessed his uncle would keep his sister close by.

So he followed his uncle’s fleet from a safe distance, taking care to never been seen. He was surprised to find them not headed for the Iron Islands but east.

What business did his uncle have in Essos?

The fleet landed in Braavos, and Theon’s questions increased. What business would bring Euron Greyjoy to this city? He had said that he was fleeing. It didn’t surprise Theon that had been a lie. But what was he doing here of all places? Could this have something to do with Cersei Lannister? What did it mean?

“What should we do?” one of the crew asked him.

Another answered for Theon, “We should take Euron’s ship, find Yara.”

Theon answered, “We don’t know Yara is on Euron’s ship. Falling into a trap won’t help anyone.”
Theon knew his response wasn’t what any of the Ironborn wanted to hear, but he didn’t care. He was thinking of something else. They needed help to overtake Euron and his men. Now that they were back in Essos, they had access to help that wasn’t preparing for a fight with the dead.

He yelled to his shipmates, “Prepare to set sail. We make for Meereen!”

It was time to take advantage of their alliance with Daenerys Targaryen.

While the hangover was far from the worst he’d ever suffered, walking into the bright light doubled by the snow made Tyrion groan as his eyes and head protested simultaneously. Stupid, terrible northern wine. Tasted terrible going down and its hangovers were twice as bad.

He spotted the red hair of Sansa Stark quickly enough. He wasn’t sure how he felt about being reunited with his former wife. He had done his best to be at the very least an acceptable husband to her, protected her from Joffrey’s worst cruelties. Even though he knew Sansa had despised him and her marriage to him.

He’d always hoped it would have least have grown to a decent union, given more time than they had had. She may have never loved him, but if circumstances had kept them together, perhaps their marriage wouldn’t have been the hell that was the Lady of Winterfell’s other two marriages, even if her engagement to Joffrey didn’t actually go that far. Though a darker voice in his head repeated Shae’s words back to him, “You want to fuck her.”

Okay, maybe he did. She was beautiful even when too young. She wasn’t too young now and even more beautiful. But that was just lust. He admired the woman she’d grown into, admired her strength. He truly would like to be friends with her. That was all.

Tyrion’s eyes took in the rest of the party. It was the group being sent to rescue Last Hearth. He checked for his queen and Jon Snow, but apparently the lovebirds were still exhausted from their previous night’s activities.

It annoyed him. Not only were they letting their personal relationship affect their royal duties, but it was bullshit that a man who’d sworn a vow of chastity was getting luckier than him these days. He still remembered the brooding boy from all those years ago. How did that kid manage to bed the most beautiful and important woman in the world? A queen? Despite his hangover, Tyrion longed for wine again.

He wobbled over to the Lady of Winterfell, whose cool gaze told him nothing of her feelings towards seeing him again. He cleared his throat, “The men are ready to leave?”

“Yes, just waiting on their king and queen’s blessing.”

Tyrion nodded, looking back to the entrance to the castle. Where in the hell could they be? They both knew the party would be leaving as early as possible.

As he debated whether or not it would be worth it just to send the crew off with the blessing of the Lady of Winterfell and call it good enough, Tyrion spotted the tell-tale hair of his liege. Alongside her padded Snow’s giant white direwolf. Tyrion didn’t spot the king but assumed Jon must be nearby.
The queen looked worried, biting her cheek as she petted the giant wolf at her side. Tyrion walked a bit away from the group, worried that whatever was making the queen nervous shouldn’t be public information. He was surprised to find that the king truly wasn’t with her.

He whispered, “Where’s the King in the North?”

“I thought he would be here,” Daenerys responded.

Tyrion nodded, deciding that one ruler’s blessing would be good enough. They could figure out where the hells Jon Snow had gone off to later. He watched as the queen slipped on her mask, smiling at the brave men leaving to rescue Last Hearth.

She greeted each man, asking for their name and wishing them luck. Tyrion could feel Sansa’s eyes on him, probably surprised by the queen’s action. It’s not something Cersei would ever do.

Which was why Tyrion had abandoned his own family to fight beside a Targaryen.

Finished, Daenerys stood next to the Lady of Winterfell. Tyrion noticed Daenerys’ eyes glancing around the courtyard. Tyrion’s eyebrow lifted. Did she really not know where Jon Snow was?

Sansa said, “May the old gods protect you all.”

The men appeared to be looking for their liege, but the nodded to the Lady of the Winterfell. They mounted their horses and took off.

Where was Jon Snow?

Tyrion walked over to the queen, who watched the group leave, worry in her eyes. Sansa walked away after a moment, seeing to something important, Tyrion figured. The girl he’d known had grown into a fierce lady.

Her mother would have been proud.

Tyrion stood by his queen. He let her watch the group fade into specks of black, lost to the horizon. He could clearly see her mind was elsewhere. He asked, “Where is Jon Snow? He should have been here.”

“I don’t know,” Daenerys answered, her queenly tone firmly in place.

Tyrion gave her the side-eye, “Don’t play coy. It doesn’t suit you. I know he must have been with you last night.”

“I’m not, and he wasn’t.” He can tell from her tone, she’s both furious at and worried about the young man.

That surprised him. As far as he knew, since they’d set sail from Dragonstone, the queen hadn’t spent a night apart from Jon Snow. He looked at her again, trying to tell if she was lying, but he guessed not. Usually when she lied, she took on an appearance of a queen who wasn’t to be questioned. Daenerys, instead, was barely concealing the emotions of not knowing her paramour’s location. “When did you see him last?”

“After the war council yesterday. He was speaking with his sisters.”

That worried Tyrion. “We should ask Lady Stark then. Maybe she knows where he went off to. Perhaps he just sleep in. It was a long journey back. Everyone sleeps better in their own home,
which he hasn’t been in for months.”

“He didn’t sleep in,” he barely heard his queen’s mumbled response. Tyrion wanted to question that. How did she know that if she hadn’t spent the night with him? But Tyrion reconsidered when the direwolf’s eyes met his. As if warning him not to upset the queen or there would be consequences.

How did the queen do that? Not only did she get man after man to fall in love with her; every fearsome beast she came across seemed to fall under her spell as well. Perhaps she should spend a month with this Night King, he might fall as well.

They caught up with Sansa who was speaking to some servant. Tyrion called out after her, “Lady Stark.”

Her cool gaze fell on him. “Yes, Lord Tyrion?”

Tyrion noticed the hatred, it was the same look he’d once seen on Catelyn Stark’s face when she took him to the Eyrie. He did his best to ignore it. He was back in Westeros, where he was a demon monkey. “Lady Stark, have you seen your lord brother?”

Sansa’s look turned to one of confusion, but her voice didn’t soften. “I’m not my brother’s keeper. Am I to keep track of his every movement?”

“Of course not,” Daenerys answered softly. Tyrion was impressed by how she kept her emotions from her voice. “But he should have been here this morning. We checked his chambers this morning to escort him, but he wasn’t here.”

Her lies were smooth as well, but Sansa didn’t know that. She thought for a moment before answering, “Arya may know. It wouldn’t surprise me if they snuck out together to practice fighting early this morning or some other such nonsense.”

Tyrion nodded. “And where might your sister be?”

“I know even less about where she would be,” Sansa answered, annoyed.

Tyrion pressed, “What about when you last seen him? Where was he headed?”

Sansa’s brow furrowed. “He was going to see Bran.” She nodded. “Bran would know where he is in any case.”

She began to walk towards the godswood. Daenerys followed, despite Sansa not instructing her to. Tyrion followed them because what else was he going to do?

The crippled boy looked older now, Tyrion noticed. If he could stand, he’d tower over him now, possibly even be taller than his brother. The boy’s eyes were white as he grasped onto the trunk of the weirtree. It was an odd thing to see, but after dragons and dead men, Tyrion didn’t think much could look odd to him anymore.

Sansa sat near her brother, watching him closely. Daenerys held back, staying next to Tyrion. She leaned down and whispered, “What is he doing?”

“I’m not sure,” Tyrion answered. “I think they mentioned Bran is the three-eyed raven now.”

“What does that mean?”
Tyrion looked to his queen. “I haven’t a clue.”

She didn’t look amused, sighing at his attempt at humor. She stood next to the Lady of Winterfell, waiting. Tyrion wasn’t sure what they were waiting for, but he took his place beside his queen. He eyed the white wolf still following her warily. He’d never quite been comfortable around the wolf, even less so now that he was pretty sure the wolf’s mouth was large enough to swallow his head whole. And he was quite found of his head.

He moved away from the beast slightly. He watched the crippled boy. It struck him how odd the scene was, a queen, a lady and a queen’s Hand waiting on a cripple as though he was the most important person here.

Maybe the boy was. Tyrion had heard stories from Varys about the boy’s strange powers. But he wasn’t sure how much to believe. Magic was certainly real, he knew, but this all-knowing brand seemed, was unfair the right word?

The boy’s head tilted back down, his eyes returning to normal. Sansa stepped up, “Bran, this is Queen Daenerys Targaryen.”

“I know,” Bran replied. Tyrion was put off by the monotone of the boy’s voice. He remembered the last time he’d seen him – he’d still just been a regular boy. Morose over his newfound disability, but still just a lad. What had happened to him beyond the wall?

Daenerys took a step forward, showing no fear. “It seems that you were last person to speak with Lord Snow. Do you have any idea where he is?”

“Jon left.”

“What?” both women cried out.

Tyrion might have found it amusing if not for the missing Warden of the North. “Do you where he went?”

“He went to Last Hearth.”

Tyrion recognized the sharp intake of breath from Daenerys meant she was just barely stopping her anger. He also noticed the narrowed eyes of Sansa, who probably also was furious. Great, Tyrion thought. He didn’t have enough to deal with today. He did his best to put on a happy face, though it was probably more a resigned duty face. “Well, now we have our answer. Shall we begin planning our attack on the undead army?” Tyrion looked back to Bran. “Assuming they are still unguarded by the Night King?”

Daenerys’ looked sharply to him. “I have to go after him.”

“No, you don’t, and shouldn’t.” Tyrion hoped this wouldn’t become a permanent duty, talking the queen out of suicidal missions to save her man. She gave him another nasty look. “Jon Snow is a warrior. One of the best in the North. He can take care of himself.”

“Against a dragon?” Daenerys began walking away.

Tyrion chased her. “You can’t go off saving him all the time. It undermines him.”

She turned to face him. She’d stopped walking, which Tyrion had decided was a victory. "Undermines him? I am his queen. He cannot do this. Go running off to fight the Night King and his dragon without my permission, without even talking with me.”
She was being emotional. Tyrion had to make her think logically again. “You are fighting this war together. Let him fight the Night King while we deal with the unprotected army. It’s how you can best help him. By helping to deal a good first blow to the enemy.”

The queen turned away from him and startled at the sight of Sansa and Bran Stark staring at them. Tyrion hoped seeing their audience would get the queen to remember herself. She took a deep breath to calm herself.

Sansa was speaking with Bran, but Tyrion couldn’t hear what they were saying. The queen strode back to speak with Bran again. “What did the two of you talk about last night?”

Good question, Tyrion thought. Jon hadn’t given any indication that he was going to leave for Last Hearth until after talking with Bran.

Bran looked closely at the Dragon Queen. “We discussed his parents.”

“Parents.” Sansa looked surprised. “You know who Jon’s mother was?” Bran nodded.

Tyrion felt an intense curiosity. One of the great mysteries of the world, what woman had Ned Stark loved enough to forsake his honor? Even Varys only had guesses.

Sansa beat him to the question though. “Who is she?”

“It’s not my secret to tell.”

Tyrion thought the queen was being oddly quiet. She looked sad and lost in thought. He prompted her, “Your grace?”

She seemed to wake up. She blinked a few times then asked Bran, “Any more information about the Night King or where his army is?”

Bran shook his head sadly. He said, “No, he’s blocking my attempts to see him.” Then he added to himself, “I need more time, more power to see him.”

Daenerys thought for a moment before turning to Sansa. “Do you have any maps of the north? Perhaps we can figure out what path the army is taking. It’s too large to be unnoticeable. It should be easy enough to discover.”

Sansa nodded. She left for a moment to send for someone to fetch the requested maps. Bran returned to his tree. Tyrion took the chance of being alone with the queen to speak with her. “It would have been nice to know he was leaving earlier. We could have told the men we just sent off to be on the lookout for their king.”

“Can’t be helped now,” Daenerys replied with a sigh. “Hopefully, he’ll know well enough to have a convincing lie.”

Tyrion wasn’t quite ready to let it go. “He’s not fond of lies or telling us important information. Like, say, bending the knee before meeting with Cersei.”

Daenerys looked slightly annoyed, probably because he’d already told her his thoughts on her and Jon not telling him about the King in the North bending the knee until the public announcement. If not for the fact that she was the queen and one did not lecture or reprimand a queen, the discussion may have been something like a lecture or reprimand. “You need to let that go, Tyrion. What’s done is done.”
“But was anything learned from it? Monarchs can’t whisper promises to each other across pillows and then not tell their advisors vital information before doing something stupid.”

“Careful, Lord Lannister,” his queen’s voice took on a warning tone.

“I’m sorry, your grace.” Tyrion clutched his head to highlight his next words. “Too much wine last night.”

She didn’t look convinced but let it slide. Tyrion continued, “We’ll have to tell everyone that Jon was planned to join them since the beginning being as he’s the only man with experience with the Night King. That’s the story.”

The queen nodded. “Do you think Lady Stark will agree?”

“What about me?”

Sansa looked angry to be talked about, but the queen didn’t seem inclined to explain herself. Tyrion rectified the situation, “We’re going to tell the northern lords that Jon had planned to join the party going to Last Hearth all along. They needed someone with experience against White Walkers and we didn’t want to tell them we were risking the king.”

Sansa nodded. “Good.”

They stood around, in silence, awkwardly.

Tyrion longed for a drink.

Daenerys had been furious. Also worried, but mostly furious. Where in the seven hells had Jon Snow gone? He was supposed to join her last night. She had waited for hours, watching the fire in her room burn out. Finally she did something she had never done before and snuck to his chambers. She found an empty bed and only Ghost waiting for her. Unsure of where he could be and worried that perhaps more bad news had been delivered, she waited for him on his bed. She had started sitting up, but the scent of him on the furs proved too tempting and she laid down. She wasn’t sure when she had fallen asleep, but she woke that morning in his room, still with only his direwolf for company.

She had retreated to her own rooms, hoping she would find him there, waiting for her, as she had for him. He could share whatever emergency had kept him last night. But he wasn’t there either.

She had dressed for the day. Then she was surprised to find Ghost waiting outside her door, and the direwolf followed her to the courtyard to see off the group chosen to go to Last Hearth. It made her wonder if Jon had commanded Ghost to follow her in his stead. She hoped not. While she was fond of the direwolf, the wolf was no substitute for the man.

She hadn’t slept well without him beside her. And she hated herself for the newfound weakness. They’d only been together for little over a month. Why was she this attached already? Part of her knew the answer to that question, but she silenced it viciously. She may have admitted to loving Jon Snow, but she wasn’t so far gone yet that she couldn’t stand to be away from him one night.

Right?
And now waiting for some servant to come with the maps she needed, Daenerys wondered what truth had he learned that it had driven him away. She had thought that learning the identity of his mother would have made him happy. He’d confessed an unhappiness of never knowing now who she was. She imagined him coming to her, excited about such information, telling her everything. Then her sharing her grief and worries about her child, them falling into bed together in comfort as well as joy.

Maybe she didn’t know him as well as she thought. They hadn’t known each other long, after all. But it felt so right, being with him. She felt like she’d known him her entire life and had just found him recently.

She looked to the weirwood, which Jon had spoken to her about during their trip up here. He’d told her how he’d often found solace under its unnatural face. How he’d taken his vows under one north of the wall. How northmen took all important vows under the gaze of a weirwood tree.

She hadn’t missed that hint. Her love had many things to recommend him, but subtly was not a strong point.

The thought made her smile, despite her anger at the man, as she looked around. This place was peaceful and beautiful. Yes, it would do nicely for a royal wedding.

The brother, Bran, interrupted her thoughts. “You never got to see him, did you? Rhaego?”

Daenerys head whipped to look at the boy in the wheeled chair. How could he possibly know that name? “How do you know that name?”

He looked to the white trunk of the weirwood. “I am the three-eyed raven. I see everything, past and present.”

Daenerys wanted to doubt, but she’d seen so much. She knew magic was real, had seen enough visions herself to believe in them. But her faith in herself had to come before anything else. She would not chase down prophecies and would never again trust in magic to solve her problems for her. “Why did you seek to see my son?”

His eyes met hers. They were a similar shade to his brother’s. The thought of Jon made Daenerys’ stomach lurch in anger and worry once more. Why did he leave? Why would the identity of his mother bother him so much? What reason could he possibly have to steal away like some thief in the night? Bran answered, “I wanted to better get to know you, understand your character. Your fate is tied to Jon’s now.”

Daenerys had had similar thoughts before, but hearing it confirmed from this stranger somehow made it chilling for her. “How do you know that?”

Bran answered, “The dragon has three heads.”

They were familiar words, but Daenerys didn’t understand. Before she could question Bran further, Podrick walked in with maps. Davos followed. Daenerys put the strange boy’s words from her mind, focusing on the task at hand.

Realizing they were without a table here, she thought about suggesting they retreat to the keep. But Podrick merely placed the maps on the ground, weighing them down with rocks. It worked well enough and the older squire seemed pleased with himself.

Davos stepped next to Tyrion, “Were you planning on telling me or the King in the North you were out here planning this war?”
“The King in the North decided to fight this war on his own,” Davos stunned looked and cursing showed he didn’t know about Jon’s escape either. “But I’m glad you’re here now.”

The group gathered around the map, for a moment Daenerys wondered if she shouldn’t call an official small council meeting, but no, once she decided on a course of action, they could break their fast, call a meeting and announce it then. She hoped that would work well enough.

Still, she looked at the group. This was a small group. The major interests were all represented, but there were people missing. Daenerys shook it off. This would be enough. It was her decision in any case. She could have every man, woman and child in Westeros give their opinion and it would still be her decision.

It wasn’t a responsibility she took lightly.

Daenerys studied the map carefully, noting the locations of Eastwick and Last Hearth and the route from one to the other. She indicated a path and asked, “Is there any reason the Night King’s army wouldn’t take this route?”

Lady Stark answered, “Not that I’m aware of, but we may want to ask Lord Flint. He’s more familiar with the area.”

Daenerys nodded. Sound advice. She looked over the path again. “We shall ask him. If that is the route, I will take Drogon, burn part of the army and return after.”

Davos spoke up, “Is this really wise?” He looked to Tyrion. “Risking both leaders at one time, as the opening move in this war? The enemy could take them both out, leaving us minus at least one more dragon and down two leaders.”

“I’m not planning to take any unnecessary risks,” Daenerys said.

Tyrion was thinking now though. “Perhaps you should at the very least take a guard. Maybe some northerners who know the area well and can protect you if Drogon is downed for some reason.”

“Do we trust the northerners that much? Many of them still hate me for my father’s crimes.”

Lady Stark bristled at that, “North men don’t betray. They aren’t like you southerners.”

Daenerys looked at Lady Stark for a moment, rejecting three answers that seemed too harsh before settling on, “The North is still getting to know me, and I it. It’s natural for there to be a period of suspicion.”

Lady Stark took a deep breath and nodded. She thought for a moment. “A small group of our best warriors might work. They could ride on the back of your dragon with you if possible.” Daenerys nodded to show it was possible.

“Do you have any names in mind?”

Sansa thought for a moment. “Lady Brienne,” Podrick’s head popped up at the mention of his knight. A small smile reached his lips at the thought of her being one of the best fighters in the North. “The Hound, a few knights of the Vale, and…” Sansa paused as if wondering if she should name the last one. “…and Arya.”

“Your sister?” Daenerys was surprised.

Sansa sighed. “She may not go. She’ll probably want to follow Jon when she hears he’s left, if
she’s not with him already, but then riding a dragon may convince her.”

Daenerys nodded. “It sounds like we have a plan.” She looked to her Hand, and he nodded agreeing with it. She announced, “Let’s break our fast and then call a meeting to let the lords know of our plans.”

Jon had rested for a bit underneath a grove of trees, and now he could feel the thrum of a hangover beginning. This had been a terrible idea. Sansa was going to worry. Daenerys and Arya were probably already arguing over who got to be the one who killed him.

Normally, his gold would be on his stubborn sister, but Daenerys was going to be extra furious considering he’d promised to join her that night.

The thrum was growing into a sharp pain. He should have stayed, should have dealt with his problem and told Sansa, Arya and Daenerys what he’d learned. But he didn’t want to. He didn’t want to deal with any of it.

Couldn’t have Bran just kept his bloody mouth shut until after the war? Now was not a good time for Jon to go through a self-identity crisis. Jon had bigger things to focus on than his true origins and Ned Stark’s lie.

It wasn’t a good time for you to fall in love either, a part of his brain whispered. But Jon hadn’t been able to control that. He would have stopped it if he could. Would have you? That same part of his brain questioned. Of course he would have, he thought in response. Then why didn’t you? It certainly isn’t convenient for you to love the Dragon Queen, especially now that you know she’s your aunt. “Shut up,” he said aloud. “Just shut up.” The noise made his head ache more.

He was going mad. Must be that Targaryen blood everyone talked about. Jon held his head, wishing he either hadn’t drank anything last night or he’d brought some ale with him today to help combat the drumming in his head. What he should do is ride back and pretend that nothing had happened. That he’d just gone hunting and went a bit farther than he’d meant to.

But he wouldn’t. He knew that. He might rather face the Night King and his new dragon than face Winterfell and the women waiting for him. He couldn’t stay in his home now that he knew that had really been a place to hide from Robert Baratheon’s wrath. He’d been in exile just as much as Dany. He just hadn’t know about it. Just as Robert hadn’t known to send his assassins north as well as east.

Ned Stark’s best friend would have killed him had he known the truth. Jon thought back to that fat, disappointing king. He would have killed him, bashed his head in as a babe just like he’d done with the other Aegon Targaryen. His true half-brother.

Jon felt something in him chill. And to think, he’d once defended the man to Daenerys. She was right to hate him.

But was she? Rhaegar had ruined the realm. It may not have been kidnapping and rape, but the man who might have been his father had thrown the world into chaos for love.

For him. He existed because Rhaegar Targaryen stole Lyanna Stark, not caring about the chaos it would cause. He was alive because of the war that killed so many. His uncle. His grandfather.
Dead at the hands of his other grandfather. All for him.

Jon’s head spun. It was too much. This was too much to unravel right now. He had to focus on the Night King. On the army of the dead. Jon unhitched his horse. He thought about what the plan had been for the group they’d sent out to complete the mission of saving Last Hearth. Jon looked at the position of the sun. The group had left Winterfell by now.

Jon decided to meet up with them. Tell them that he’d decided to help out personally, as he had the most experience with the enemy. He went in the direction he guessed they would take. He wasn’t sure if the men would have overtaken him by now, since he’d napped, but he doubted it. He’d rode his horse hard.

He tried to think about what he’d say to the men, but his mind couldn’t stop going back over what he’d learned the night before. Ned Stark, not his father, but his uncle. Couldn’t he have been a bit more honest and pretended Jon was Brandon’s bastard? Then at least Jon would have considered Ned Stark his uncle, even if which sibling sired him was a lie. Perhaps Catelyn would have hated him less as her first betrothed’s bastard. She could have shifted her hatred to a dead man she was supposed to marry.

But no, Ned Stark was his father, regardless of blood.

Jon, so lost in his thoughts, was almost surprised to find that his horse had slowed. He blinked, looking around to where they were now. He recognized this place. It would be a good location to meet up with the rest of the party. It along the best route.

He only hoped they hadn’t passed by already. He stopped his horse, hitching again and climbing off. He knew the animal may not get enough rest in the days to come and wanted to give the beast any opportunity he could for a break.

Jon tried to clear his mind of the thoughts consuming him as he waited. They instead drifted to Daenerys, to how she looked with only candlelight upon her, the way her eyes crinkled when she smiled, how her silver hair felt under his fingertips. Her hair made him realize something. When he thought of their potential children, he often pictured it abstractly since he had only know half of his own heritage, but now he could picture them fully.

Their children could look fully Targaryen. His and Daenerys’ bloodlines were shared, and Jon’s sons and daughters could easily have silver hair and violet eyes, just like their mother.

Jon shook his head, how lucky Ned Stark had been that Jon took after his mother fully, not showing a hint of his true father. He wondered how often his father thanked the gods in front of the weirtree for that small mercy. Even Ned Stark’s honesty would have been questioned had he claimed a silver haired, violet eyed child as his own.

The sound of approaching horses pulled Jon away from his thoughts. He recognized several of the men as those that had been chosen for this mission. As they came closer, he could see their surprise at their king appearing before them. They slowed their horses and Jon braced himself, trying to look like a king who didn’t have to answer too many questions.

He knew his lies wouldn’t stand up to much inquiry.

“Your grace?” One of the men questioned, Jon remembered him as serving the House Umber, Ser Henrich.

Jon wished he was a better liar as he responded, “I’m sorry for the deception, but it was discussed
after the meeting that I would join you brave men since I have the most experience fighting the Night King.”

“The Dragon Queen didn’t say anything when she sent us off.”

How was she? Jon wanted to ask the knight. How could he have missed her already? They had only spent one night apart. He repressed the feeling. “She may have feared the wrong person overhearing. We didn’t want to cause dissent among the lords.”

Jon could tell these men didn’t quite believe him, but he also could see that none of them felt strongly enough about it to question a king. Jon mounted his horse. There were advantages to being a royal rather than a bastard.

The boy in the party approached him, riding beside him. They said nothing to each other until the boy questioned what the men weren’t brave enough to ask, “Why did you fear dissent, your grace? You are king, your lords obey you.”

Did they? They hadn’t before when he’d begged them to help him take back Winterfell for Sansa. Jon wasn’t even a king anymore not that many people knew that. Or it could be argued that he was, only of all of Westeros, not just the North. Jon lied before his thoughts could stop him from not speaking, “We feared they’d take it the wrong way if their king left them as soon as he arrived again.”

The boy nodded, as if understanding, and Jon could see out of the corner of his eye that the rest of the men took the lie at face value as well. The questions would end now.

Jon is surprised he’s such a good liar. But maybe he shouldn’t be. Hadn’t he lied to the wildlings, earned their trust through deception? His life was a lie, only made sense that he’d be good at them when he tried. Honest men truly were the best liars; Ned Stark had taught him that, if nothing else.

These were not good thoughts to be having right now. They were distracting. He wasn’t alone anymore. He had a mission.

Jon focused on the image of the Night King raising the dead as he stared him down.

He would defeat the monster, regardless of his parentage.

Arya walked the grounds of Winterfell, silently and beneath the notice of all. She loved it. She wished she had had such skills as a child, when she’d been forced so often to act like a lady because everyone recognized her as a Stark immediately. When she had never quite lived up to the perfection that was Sansa.

She’d hated it. She remembered telling her father she didn’t want to be a lady, remembered the hurt and confusion in his eyes at her words even though she suspected he would have supported her in the end. He had gotten her a dancing instructor after all.

She missed him so.

At least she had Jon back. She had wanted to spend every moment with him since he’d returned but after spending hours with her and Sansa, sharing tales and joking like they’d only been separated a
few days rather than years, he’d left to go see Bran.

Arya had wanted to come with him, but he’d asked her for some time alone, reassuring her that they would not be separated again.

He’d never done that before and Arya questioned the change. As a child, she’d followed Jon everywhere and he’d never asked for time alone. She would have given it to him, but he always seemed to like having her as a shadow. The rest admired Robb and followed his lead, and Arya did too, but only she gave Jon that kind of attention. He’d been so starved for it that she guessed he soaked in every bit of affection she gave him.

But he turned it away now. What had changed? It had been years, they’d all changed, but Arya suspected something else at play here. Like Jon no longer craved her attention and love because that need was being fulfilled elsewhere now.

It was a thought that kept turning over in her mind. Maybe Sansa had been right, maybe Jon had been taken with the Dragon Queen. Maybe he was a man now with a man’s needs.

Arya dropped that line of thinking, not wanting to think of Jon in that way.

She focused instead on Winterfell and all its hidden nooks and crannies. Arya knew her home so well and now she had the skills to be anywhere she desired. She used them well, visiting every spot, watching every lord and person in the keep for the slightest hint of deception or treachery. She would not lose another family member.

She would not lose Jon. Not after finding him again after so long.

But today was different, today was the first time she’d seen another face from her past. Arya had no reason to visit the forge, but she’d craved something new today. So she made her way there. She wasn’t wearing any face but her own since so few remained who actually knew who she was.

She had seen him before she knew it was him. His shape was familiar to her, even from the back. But she couldn’t be sure without seeing his face. Arya forwent her usual caution to walk up to him, staring a bit. Could it be?

He’d recognized her right away, “Arya?”

Arya’s heart stopped. She hadn’t seen Gendry Rivers in so long. She hadn’t even realized she missed him until now, looking at him. She wanted to wrap her arms around him and hug. A girly part of her she didn’t like admitting to having even wanted to cry tears of joy at seeing him. She scowled instead, “So you’re alive then?”

He smiled in response, knowing her well enough to catch her meaning without her needing to explain herself. Gods, Arya really had missed him. “I could say the same about you.”

Arya gave him a look up and down, trying to stay unimpressed. She looked at the work in his hand. “What’s that then?”

“It’s an arakh,” Gendry told her. “Dothraki weapon. Kind of hard to make, the balance is weird.”

Arya nodded, picking up one of the weapons. She’d seen them before in Braavos, but never used one. She swung it around with an expertise Gendry had never seen from her. She wasn’t a fan of the curved blade, but figured it was used properly on a horse. She set it down again, glancing at Gendry’s reaction.
He looked impressed, but mostly just happy, that small smile still on his lips. Arya repressed her own smile in return. Gendry Waters didn’t need to know that he meant anything to her. He said, “I met you brother, the king.”

Arya couldn’t stop her smile at the mention of her brother, “Jon? What did you think of him?”

She decided she might have to hate Gendry if he didn’t like Jon. “He’s all right. I like him. Shorter than I thought he’d be.”

Good, Arya thought. She was glad she didn’t have to kill Gendry. Though it gave her an idea. “Did Jon say anything about the Dragon Queen when you guys traveled together? You know, campfire talk between the men?”

Gendry blushed. “Ladies shouldn’t know about such things.”

Arya rolled her eyes. “I’m not a lady. How many times do I have to tell you that?”

“You’re a Stark. That means you’re a lady.”

“I spent several moons in company with the Hound. Nothing you said around a campfire could shock me, Gendry.”

Gendry smiled. “That’s probably true. He was with us beyond the wall too. Funny how we all ended up at the same place.”

“No really,” Arya shrugged. “The fight is up here.”

Gendry nodded, picking up one of the weapons he was forging to work on it as he talked. “Well, we didn’t much talk about the queen, being as she hates my guts. Or would, if she knew I existed.” Arya frowned, just realizing that was probably true. “The king just told me to send a message for her to save us when we got into a spot of trouble.”

And she had saved them. Her brother was alive because of Daenerys Targaryen. Arya could never forget that, no matter what she found out about the queen. “That’s it?”

Gendry shrugged, “I don’t know. I guess the wilding made a comment about her cunt probably tasting like fire which pissed off Jon and that Mormont fellow.” Gendry’s eyes widened as he realized what he’d said. “Shit, oh bugger. I shouldn’t say that kind of stuff to a lady. I just forget.”

“I’m not a lady,” Arya repeated. She popped up to sit on Gendry’s work bench, which he didn’t seem to like but didn’t tell her to get off of it. “Anything exciting happen beyond the wall?”

Gendry chuckled. “Well, I saw an undead bear get put on fire.”

Arya’s eyebrow raised and Gendry told her the tale. That led to him talk about what had happened with the brotherhood and how he’d ultimately ended up back in Flea Bottom.

“What about you?” he asked, finished with another arakh. “What have you been up to since we last saw each other?”

Arya shifted, unsure of how much she should tell him. “Went to Braavos, learned how to fight. Came back here, saw Hot Pie and then headed back to Winterfell.”

Gendry’s eyebrow raised and he walked up to her, invading her space. “That was a shit story. Shouldn’t ladies be better at stories than Flea Bottom bastards?”
Arya shoved him away. “Fuck off.”

Gendry put on a fake shocked face. “Such language from a lady’s mouth, what would your septa say?”

Arya laughed, really laughed, in the first time she could remember in a long time. Gendry and she fell into an easy rhythm of conversation. It was effortless in a way conversations almost never were for Arya, so she was quite cross when they were interrupted by a squire.

Gendry, who clearly knew the lad, smiled, “How’s it going?”

The boy rolled his eyes. “It’s been better. My lord’s all bent out of shape because of the king taking off without telling anyone.”

“What?” Arya shouted, leaping to her feet. It startled both Gendry and the boy. “Jon Snow’s gone?”

The boy nodded and Arya grabbed him by the scruff of his shirt. “Where did he go? When did he leave?”

The squire’s eyes dodged around, “I don’t know.”

Arya realized this boy held no answers.

She made her way to find someone who would know.

The meeting with the northern lords had gone well, or at least well enough. They all believed the lie that Jon had always intended to go to Last Hearth and agreed Daenerys should attack while Jon distracted the Night King. Most of the lords wanted the queen to leave immediately, but Tyrion had convinced them to wait a while to give Jon and the rest a chance to attack and distract. It was agreed that Daenerys would leave in a few days, and hopefully they would figure out exactly where to send her and her dragons in that time.

That settled and the lords dismissed, Sansa now poured over the reports on food supplies. The other keeps were sending what they could, but she suspected it still wouldn’t be enough. If they stayed on tight rations they should be fine for a month or so, but the threat would probably require an extended fight, they needed more. She hoped the Lannister army arrived soon, with more food than men.

But she didn’t trust the word of Cersei Lannister, still suspected some foul play at work. Cersei wouldn’t help the North out of the kindness of her heart, it didn’t exist, her kindness or her heart. Sansa knew that better than anyone. Cersei would see this fight as an opportunity to wipe out what remained of her enemies. After all, they’d all be gathered in one spot. Easy prey.

“Lady Stark,” the queen’s Hand entered, interrupting her worries.

Sansa managed a courtly greeting, “Lord Tyrion.”

Seeing Tyrion reminded her of what she had always thought would be the worst time of her life. But Ramsay Bolton had proved her wrong. She’d been somewhat shielded from Joffrey’s worst
cruelties, thanks to the Hound, Tyrion, and sometimes even Cersei, but she’d had no protection from Ramsay. Not even Baelish had done anything despite his claims of love for her, and she didn’t believe he hadn’t known what kind of man he’d sold her to.

Gods, how she hated that man and his twisted love for her. He may have claimed to want and love her, but she was just another pawn in his game. That’s how he saw everyone, pawns to be used and discarded as needed. She should have killed him sooner. Fed him to Ramsay’s dogs once they’d finished their master.

Tyrion cleared his throat bringing her back to the present. She had to stop that. The fight they were in was too important for her to get lost in bad memories. She looked at the dwarf. “Did you need something?”

“Actually I wanted to find out if you needed anything.” Tyrion took the seat across from her. “Now that we’re allies, I wanted to get a full account of the situation in Winterfell. And help, in any way I can.”

It was strange seeing him again. Sansa had such conflicting memories of him. He’d been kind to her, but she had not wanted him. Hated that she’d been sold off to him. Joffrey had been less embarrassing than a dwarf. She chastised herself. She shouldn’t judge him on something he had no control over. She pushed her feelings down to answer, “Thank you.” She held out some papers. “Here the figures we have for food stores. I think that may be our biggest problem.”

“That and the army of dead men who’ve broken through the wall.”

“We aren’t fighters. I figured we’d leave that to Jon and the rest of them.”

Tyrion gave her a small smile. “You know heroes get all the songs, but it’s the boring work that we do that really wins wars. Planning supply lines and ensuring the army’s needs are met, problems solved before it’s even realized it could be a problem.”

Sansa smiled, knowing the Hand was correct and being kind again. It had been so long since Sansa had experienced kindness. She tempered her happiness though, knowing that she couldn’t trust a Lannister.

Tyrion looked over the numbers. “It looks like we’ll be in trouble after about a month.” He set down the paper, searching the room. Sansa guessed he was checking for wine. He frowned but focused on her again. “We should send word to Meereen now. Have them send food and anything else you may need in the coming battle.”

“Meereen?”

“Yes. It’s the advantage of allying with a foreign invader. They can call upon foreign aid. Daenerys is a queen in Essos as well. Her call will be answered.”

Sansa had never thought about that. She didn’t think much about the world outside of Westeros and the North. She’d spent her childhood daydreaming about leaving it, but now as an adult, she never intended to leave Winterfell again. She considered it and said, “It would take too long to get here.”

“You think we’re not going to need food in a few months’ time?”

Sansa couldn’t deny the point. “See it done.”

Tyrion nodded. “Dorne’s a mess right now, but they were our allies as well. We may be able to get
food from them too. And wine. They should definitely bring wine.”

Sansa’s eyebrow lifted. “You really think Cersei’s going to let them march over her lands with food for us without seizing it for herself?”

“Cersei is our ally now.”

“You really believe that?” Sansa couldn’t believe that Tyrion Lannister, of all people, could trust that woman. He knew as well as she did what a monster she was. Probably even better having known her since childhood.

“She has reasons to fight. She doesn’t want the dead to come south any more than we do.”

“She doesn’t care about that. She doesn’t care about anything but her own power.”

“She cared about her children,” Tyrion argued.

“They are all dead now,” Sansa replied. “They are dead and she has nothing but herself now.”

Tyrion said nothing to that. “Do you want a drink? I know I could use one.”

Sansa sighed, annoyed by his bad habits. She pointed to a cabinet in the corner where he could find some alcohol. He waddled over, returning with two glasses and a bottle of wine. He poured them giving her one. She took a sip. She grimaced at the sour taste.

The Lannisters had done many cruel things to her, but perhaps the cruelest was giving her a taste for better wine than could be found in the North.

“It is quite terrible, isn’t it?” Leave it to Tyrion to have noticed her reaction. Sansa took another sip, this time it went down smoother. “Yes, the Dornish should bring food and red wine.”

“Who is ruling Dorne now?” Sansa asked. She had intended to stay out of southern affairs now, but she had played the game and played it well. Jon would still need such information even if he only acted as Warden in the North.

“A few of the remaining Martells are squabbling over it, from what I understand. They allow women and bastards to take the throne, so it’s just a matter of who’s the most popular or has the most powerful army.” Tyrion grimaced at the wine. “Which becomes the same thing after enough time.”

Sansa snorted at the joke. She had forgotten how funny Tyrion could be as well as clever. She looked at her glass of wine, already empty. Tyrion filled it without her asking. She asked a question she’d been wondering since Jon had gotten that raven from the queen’s Hand what felt like years ago. “Why do you follow her? Daenerys Targaryen? What makes her so special?”

Tyrion licked his lips, really considering the question before answering. “She’s different than other monarchs, or at least tries to be. She’s had a hard life, even harder than you or me.” Sansa’s lips turned downward at the presumption. Tyrion explained further, “She didn’t grow up pampered in a palace or keep. She begged on the streets, ran from assassins with her shit brother. She built herself up with nothing but a name to become the most powerful woman in the world. I’ve never seen the like. She is trying to build a better world for all people, and gods help my cynical soul, but I believe in her. I want to help her achieve it.”

Sansa’s eyebrow lifted. She thought about when Tyrion said, thought about what would help the Dragon Queen achieve her goals. She didn’t ask but said, “You plan to marry her to Jon.”
“When the wars finish, it’s good to give the people a celebration. Not just a new queen, but a wedding feast.”

Sansa knew it would probably be for the best, but she didn’t like the idea of sending any of her family south to marry a royal. She remembered too clearly what had happened last time. The pack was strongest together, and she refused to lose any more family.

She said none of this to Tyrion, knowing it would be unwise to start an unprepared argument with him. She asked another question that she’d been wondering about, “Is Jon still king? I thought he was Warden now.”

Tyrion’s head cocked as he finished his drink. “Officially, yes. But timing will be everything with that announcement. You saw how those lords reacted. They are more likely to crown a new king than accept Daenerys Targaryen at Jon Snow’s word.” Tyrion paused. “More likely they’d get a new queen.”

“Would that be so bad?”

“We don’t have time for power struggles. We are fighting an army of dead men. We need leaders. Jon and Daenerys are the best we’ve got. It’s our job to guide them as best we can.”

Tired of politics, Sansa went back to looking at the supply numbers. “We’ll have to include oil and wood for burning, as well as easy access to fire. The dead will need to be burned in the North always now.”

Tyrion nodded along, “So that our people can burn our dead before the Others get the chance to raise them. No need to increase the numbers in their army if we can help it.”

“Jon said the Night King did it instantly. He raised his hands and the dead rose with them.” Sansa hoped her brother was wrong about that, but the haunted look on his face when he’d told her didn’t give her a lot reason to doubt him.

“The Night King can do it almost instantly. Perhaps his generals aren’t so powerful.” Tyrion shrugged. “Either way, we’ll need fire.”

The conversation continued on, they discussed provisions, plans, and politics all while consuming wine. Sansa could feel her thoughts turning fuzzy, but she wasn’t sure how much she minded. She looked at the dwarf and thought about Littlefinger.

Tyrion was probably just as clever as Lord Baelish, but he was a lot better company. Peytr didn’t have the dwarf’s wry wit, and everything he said had to be examined from all angles. He lied with the truth, faked sincerity as easily as breathing, and never showed his real motives. Every conversation with him was a game, one you never knew if you won until it was too late to know.


Sansa suddenly regretted the wine, “He’s gone to Last Hearth.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Sansa noticed Tyrion making himself as small as possible so that he could sneak out and let the sisters have a private conversation. Sansa turned her attention back to her sister, “I haven’t seen you all day. I thought perhaps you were with him.”

Arya’s eyes narrowed and Sansa knew her words were being questioned. Arya said, “Why did he
“leave?”

“Bran said that he told Jon who his mother was, it must have upset him.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Jon has always wanted to know who his mother was. That wouldn’t upset him.”

“Unless he didn’t like what he learned.”

Arya spat, “Don’t pretend you know him.”

“He’s my brother too.”

“Half-brother, like you always insisted on calling him.”

Sansa felt like she’d been slapped. It was true. She’d been so cruel to Jon when they were younger. She regretted it now and Jon had forgiven her, but it didn’t take back what she’d done. Sansa was happy to see that Tyrion had made his escape, leaving the sisters alone.

“I don’t know why Jon left, Arya, but I’m sure he’ll tell us when he gets back.”

Arya frowned. “Bugger that, I’m going after him.”

“Arya wait…”

Arya didn’t seem to listen, so Sansa moved to block the door. Arya glared at her. That bone-chilling glare that frightened Sansa. “Wait, we need you to help Queen Daenerys.”

This seemed to make Arya pause. “With what?”

“She’s going to attack the army of the dead on the back of her dragon. She needs a small guard to accompany her.”

Arya’s eyes widened. “I’m going to be flying on a dragon?”

“Yes,” Sansa answered, knowing this was probably the only way she could get Arya not to chase after Jon.

Arya smiled.

They’d be arriving at Last Hearth in the morning, so they went over the plan one more time. Jon tried to stop and clarify every detail for every man. He didn’t want any small mistakes to cost them everything.

He hoped Daenerys was safe and would be burning what she could of the undead army on Drogon’s back. He hoped the Night King hadn’t left. He hoped the undead army hadn’t the time to join their master just yet. He hoped the men and women of Last Hearth were still alive.

He hoped for so many impossible things.

Jon looked to the boy who’d been instrumental to their plans, the one named after his lord father,
Ned. The name had made Jon uncomfortable when he first heard it, opening fresh wounds too soon to let them even begin healing. But the boy was bright and eager to help, looking up to Jon in a way younger brothers idealized older ones.

He reminded Jon of Olly, which brought up another set of wounds. The scars of which he still saw every time he removed his shirt.

Jon tried to set all of this aside, tried to push his feelings down and be the leader everyone told him he naturally was. He’d always just acted as he thought Ned Stark would in any given situation.

But he’d never known Ned Stark, not really. Jon wasn’t sure who Ned Stark was anymore.

He tried to put all of that aside too, but every time he had a moment to himself, it nagged at him. Everything he’d ever known was a lie. How did one knowingly live a lie?

They didn’t risk a campfire, not this close to their destination, but the group huddled together for warmth and talked as men did around fires with ale flowing. Not that they had any ale. Jon mostly stayed silent, letting the others exchange tales of battles and women.

But tonight, perhaps because of the courage that came from knowing they might all die tomorrow, one of the men directed a question to Jon, “Is it true what they say about her? About the Dragon Queen?”

Jon’s heart stopped at the thought of her. He’d been attempting not to think of Daenerys as well. She filled him with a strange but poignant combination of pain and longing. He missed her desperately but feared her reaction to the truth of his birth. He tried to show none of this on his face, keeping up his stoic expression, “Depends. What do they say about her?”

“That she has an insatiable lust. That she takes a new lover every night, looking for a man or woman who can please her. Leaving each victim behind, completely drained once she finishes with them.”

These were the rumors about Daenerys? Jon struggled not to sigh or yell. “No, she does not take a new lover every night.” She did have a bit of an insatiable appetite when it came to sex, but that was hardly a burden to him. Even when he struggled to keep up with her and she left him completely drained. Jon shifted, thinking about Daenerys like this wasn’t helping him.

Another one of the men spoke up, “What about the one that says she kills every man she beds once she’s had him? Like one of those spiders?”

“That’s ridiculous,” Jon snapped.

The men exchanged looks, clearly having more questions but not wanting to risk their king’s wrath.

This was not how Jon wanted to spend his last night alive, but then he thought, if it helped her then it would be a night well spent. If addressing the rumors about her and dispelling them gave her the means to get the trust of his people then it was worth it. With this thought in mind, Jon said, “Let’s just get all of them out, and I’ll tell you as best I know which ones are true and what’s bullshit. I may not know everything about her, but I’ve spent three months with her. I know some things.”

So that’s what they did. Some of the rumors were rather tame, “Does she really wear platforms on her feet to keep herself taller than anyone she faces?”

“I never truly noticed her footwear, but she’s definitely shorter than I am. Never made any real effort to hide it.” Even in their first meeting, she’d brought herself down to his level. She didn’t
need pretend height, she towered over them all even with her diminutive stature.

Some were unsettlingly close to truth, “I hear she feeds her enemies to her dragons.”

“Well, I’m still here, and she certainly had reason to feed me to them,” Jon answered, not sure how else to reassure the men without lying to them.

Some were plain stupid, “I hear she’s secretly a man.”

“To the best of my knowledge, she is a woman. She wears riding leathers and I’ve never seen a bulge.” The men laughed but Jon thought to himself that he could add he knows she’s a woman as he’s been nose-deep in her cunt more times than he can accurately count.

The oldest one there (Jon placed him in his 60s) had said nothing for most of the journey, but spoke now, “My wife believes that ridiculous rumor that the Dragon Queen has been trying to seduce you unsuccessfully, as she’s madly in love with you.” Jon wasn’t sure how to respond to that and thankfully didn’t have to when the old man continued. “Notice I said ridiculous because now that I’ve seen the Dragon Queen, if you had a shot at fucking her and you didn’t take it, then you don’t deserve your crown or your youthful good looks, your grace.” The other men clearly look uncomfortable at the man’s too honest words, but Jon chuckled. The man continued at Jon’s encouraging reaction, “That goes for all you boys. Fuck every pretty girl who lets you. Don’t let that honor bullshit stop you. All those rules were made by bitter men and ladies who couldn’t get laid.”

A few men laughed out loud at that. One of the braver ones asked Jon, “Have you fucked her?”

Yes, repeatedly, Jon thought, but he lied, “No. We’re political allies, nothing more.”

Jon could tell some of the men didn’t believe him, but they wouldn’t say anything to his face. Another of the men said, unthinkingly, “But she fucks better than any other woman in the Seven Kingdoms. I mean, she rides a dragon, imagine how well she’d ride a man.”

Part of Jon wanted to laugh and confirm she was one hell of a rider, the part that missed just being one of the soldiers, an insignificant bastard whose words carried no weight. But he wasn’t. He led these men, so he scowled and said, “You shouldn’t speak of the queen that way.”

The men’s mirth ended, and Jon hated himself a little for being the one who’d done that. Young Ned asked in a soft voice, “Is it true the Dragon Queen saved your life?”

“Yes,” Jon answered just as softly. He remembered that moment so clearly. He had been so sure she wouldn’t come. Then she appeared like something from a legend. He’d pushed Tormund out of his way in his haste to see her. She had reached out to him and Jon knew he’d never love another the way he loved her.

Gods, how he loved her. And how had he repaid her for saving him? Left her to deal with the northern lords alone in what was sure to be a hostile environment and wanting to selfishly keep her by not telling her the truth.

Jon’s melancholy must have shown because the men grew silent, each lost in their own thoughts. A snapped branch in the distance caused Jon to stand, his hand reaching for his sword. The other men followed him. They turned out, ready to battle whatever waited for them in the woods.

Jon’s eyes searched for the tell-tale blue eyes. They were too late, the army of the dead was here. Still, Jon inhaled deeply. He would destroy as many as he could before joining their ranks. He would protect his men to the best of his ability.
Daenerys’ face appeared in his thoughts, unbidden. He would try to survive so he could return to her. He tensed, ready for a fight.

Out from the cover of the trees was a man in black, a crow. Jon’s eyes widened and his head snapped around. He recognized these men. They had been his brothers once, not so long ago.

When he spotted his friend, Edd, Jon grinned. “What are you doing here?”

Edd returned his smile and shrugged, “Not much point in guarding a wall that’s been breached. We came here to join the men from Eastwatch, but the Night King got here first. We’ve been trying to figure out a way to help them.”

One of the men who’d come with Jon said, “You’re men of the Night’s Watch?”

Edd nodded to him, serious once more. “Shouldn’t you be on the Wall then?”

One of the crows answered, “We vowed to protect the realm. Sitting in an empty broken down castle on an empty wall isn’t helping anyone.”

Grateful for the unexpected help, Jon sat them all down, and explained the plan once more, including the new men into it.

Daenerys didn’t handle patience well. It didn’t naturally suit her. She tried not to show how eager she was to get on Drogon and burn her enemies. She knew such eagerness would be perceived as her being the reincarnation of her father.

These northerners already thought her a monster, no reason to give them more reason to assume the worst about her.

Still, she wasn’t a patient person and hated waiting. She hated it even more when part of it was tied to trying to guess what Jon was doing and when he was planning to attack so they could coordinate their movements. They had based it on how quickly the group should reach Last Hearth from Winterfell. But she didn’t like thinking about Jon and the danger he’d put himself into, again.

Stupid, bloody heroes.

Why had he left? It was a question that kept her up too late each night. She hadn’t been sleeping well without him beside her. This only added to her irritation, as she felt it was a weakness to get so attached to him so quickly.

Daenerys tried to put thoughts of the king out of her mind by occupying her time getting to know the northern lords. But every time she tried to speak with one of them, their answers were curt as they eyed her suspiciously. Daenerys had known it was going to be a hard, long journey to gain the North’s trust, but it still hurt. It might have been easier with someone by her side to ease the suspicion but she found herself without any northern allies, except Ser Davos’ occasional help. But she kept her head high, it wasn’t the first time she found herself hated, probably wouldn’t be the last time either. She knew how to handle it.

Daenerys also attempted to bond with Jon’s sisters. But Sansa gave her the same suspicious looks as the rest of the northerners, and Arya kept her distance, studying her from afar in the same
manner her dragons watched strangers, deciding if they were friend or food. Daenerys accepted their mistrust as best she could, understanding that it would take time to gain their favor.

Time they did not have.

When the day to leave finally arrived, Daenerys was almost gleeful. She was tired of being hated except when she visited her Unsullied and Dothraki camps. It would be nice to get away for a while, even with the party she’d be with consisting of mostly northern people. She guessed they would at least hide their hatred of her as she would hold their lives in her hands as they rode her dragon.

Her handmaidens dressed her in her armor. Missandei and Ghost escorted her to where the group was meeting, a few miles away from Winterfell to give Drogon room to land.

Ghost had been the one bright spot during this time. The direwolf took to her easily, following her everywhere. It had been annoying at times, such as when he tried to squeeze in the privy with her, but mostly she found it comforting. A way to be with Jon in a way even without him being here, his wolf so much like him.

Daenerys saw the group gathered in the clearing and walked up to join them. As fitting for a queen, she’d been the last to arrive, making the rest of the party wait on her arrival. She was surprised to see how the northerners had equipped themselves. “Where are your bows?” She saw the heavy swords they all carried. “Leave the longswords behind, they’ll only slow us down.”

“What?” one of the men looked at her as a silly woman who knew nothing of war. It was a look that Daenerys had seen before, one that still frustrated her. How many cities did she have to conquer for people to see her as a warrior queen?

She explained with as much patience as she could muster, “We shouldn’t even touch the ground. You don’t need swords, bows and daggers will be your weapons. Bows to shoot from Drogon’s back and daggers in case we are forced to land.”

“You want us to shoot while flying?” The tone in the man’s voice suggested that he suspected she was as mad as her father had been.

“Yes. I suspect it won’t be much different from using a bow on horseback,” Daenerys didn’t understand the confusion.

“Lances and longswords are the standard weapons from horseback in Westeros, my lady,” Brienne informed her. "Shooting arrows from horseback isn't a common skill."

Daenerys felt a little foolish to not know that. It was common practice to shoot from horseback among the Dothraki. She didn’t even think about how things differed in Westeros. She nodded and then smiled. “Well, you will learn how to on our journey. My bloodriders will instruct you.” Arya looked excited to learn this new skill but the rest looked weary. Daenerys turned to the Dothraki who would be accompanying them. They didn’t seem to understand what the hold-up was.

Daenerys explained the situation to them and informed them they would be teaching them how to use a bow while moving.

One of her bloodriders frowned, in Dothraki he said, “I thought these were warriors.”

“They are. They fight differently in these lands.”

“But they should know how to do this. Shooting from horseback is learned as a child.”
Daenerys frowned now, “They would say to you that it’s a child’s skill to use a longsword and fight in full armor. They differ but have their own skills.”

Her men nodded, but she could still see their disapproval. Daenerys glanced back to the northerners who also looked just as uncomfortable. She knew neither side trusted each other, couldn’t understand each other’s different ways.

But they had to fight together. It would make all of their army stronger to combine their different fighting styles. Why couldn’t both sides see that? Daenerys repressed a sigh. Her people would learn. Both Essos and Westeros would come together. They had to, for the survival of them all.

Daenerys would see it done. That would be her task as queen. It had always been her goal, to bring people together and build a new, better world. The hard work of doing that in the Seven Kingdoms started here and now.

As they waited for the new weapons to be fetched from the forge, a question occurred to Daenerys. “How do you hunt then? If you don’t shoot bows from horses.”

“Usually either with spears or you dismount from your horse with a bow for the most accurate shot,” Brienne answered.

Daenerys nodded, but it seemed like an ineffectual way to hunt to her. Though, she supposed, she’d only hunted with her dragons, whose methods were completely different than a human’s.

Arya explained it fully, “Westerosi use long bows mostly. You can’t get a good enough pull to shoot the arrow without a firm stance. It’s hard to do from a horse. Short bows are used on horseback because they don’t need such a long reach.”

“Why are long bows used then?”

“Because of armor. Short bows don’t have the force to pierce steel or iron, arrows just bounce off.”

Daenerys nodded. That made sense. Dothraki didn’t wear much armor, preferring speed to safety. She thanked both women for telling her, she needed to learn these things. She always felt like a fool for not knowing them, inwardly cursing her brother for not teaching her anything of value about their home. She’d spent her life in foreign lands, and even though she was home now, it often felt like she was still in a foreign land.

She suddenly missed Jon desperately. He had felt like home.

Daenerys repressed that feeling. It wouldn’t do to show such weakness in mixed company. She had to be a queen. There was no room for the woman.

With her mind, she reached out to her dragons. Drogon responded immediately, but Rhaegal seemed agitated and distant. Daenerys wondered what had gotten into him. Rhaegal and his golden brother didn’t have the same rider connection she had with Drogon, but they had always listened to her best. Followed her commands the easiest. Drogon was the stubborn, strong-willed one.

But then Rhaegal had been so close with Viserion, and she knew he still missed his brother fiercely. Daenerys couldn’t perfectly communicate with her children, but she had tried to warn them what had happened to their brother and what they might have to do to him.

She thought they had understood as they had raged at her attempt in telling them, flying off to hunt and burn. It had broken her heart to feel the pain through her connection with them. Daenerys wished she could comfort them better, like a true mother.
She waited for her dragon to land. Lost in her thoughts, she was startled when she found that Arya had appeared next to her, looking to the sky. The girl was as silent as Jon’s direwolf. “Is the dragon coming?” Arya asked.

“Yes,” Daenerys answered.

“How do you call for them?”

Daenerys looked up as well, hearing Drogon’s roar. It startled most of the northerners. This amused Daenerys to see but she tried to hide it, as it wouldn’t be taken well for her to laugh at their fear of her dragon. “I share a connection with all of my children, I reach out to them through it when I need them.”

“And they follow your will?”

Daenerys cocked her head. “Not exactly. A dragon is no slave. I can ask and compel, but they will do as they want.”

Drogon came through the clouds, shading all of them with his massive shadow. Daenerys stepped to him while everyone else stepped away though Arya stayed close to the queen. Once he landed, Daenerys petted Drogon’s snout. The warmth of the fire beneath his scales comforted her.

She saw Rhaegal flying above them, could feel that he was still agitated. She tried to tell him to stay behind if he wanted, but that just made him growl in response. Daenerys turned to the rest of the party. She hesitated briefly, wondering how to best arrange the party on Drogon’s back. Her dragon wasn’t used to carrying more than her, and she’d remembered he hadn’t been fond of it the last time it happened.

Then again, that may have just been the pain of losing his brother.

Daenerys, decided on a course of action, spoke loudly and clearly, with Missandei translating for the Dothraki, “Watch me closely as to how to climb on Drogon. I will assist you up, but try not to agitate him as he may not let ride.” The queen did not add that the dragon may answer any agitation with fire, not wanting to scare them unnecessarily.

Her words made the northerners even more wary, with the exception of Arya, whose eyes glowed in excitement at riding a dragon. She was the first to follow Daenerys. Daenerys gave the young woman a small smile which was answered with a grin.

Maybe Jon’s family didn’t hate her.

She helped the northern warriors up, none having any grace and a few causing Drogon to growl when they misstepped and hit a sensitive part of his wing. Daenerys could feel Drogon’s anger at being used this way and she attempted to soothe him, telling him they would be getting revenge for Viserion’s death. They would burn as much as the enemy as they could.

Rhaegal answered her thoughts with a roar. The northerners startled, annoying Drogon more.

Once everyone was seated, Daenerys told them, “Hold on tightly.” Drogon flapped his mighty wings and they flew to kill as much as their enemy as they could while Jon distracted the Night King.

At least, Daenerys hoped that was what was happening.
Beric looked at the undead dragon he’d been confronted with for far too long. They had been trying to escape for days now, but to no avail. Beric looked at the wildings from the Wall that he’d come to respect. They were brave, but they didn’t understand the importance of coordinated attacks. Several of them had fed the undead dragon on suicidal attacks.

What surprised him most was Meera Reed. She was as fierce and brave as any knight he’d ever known. She had unofficially took charge of Last Hearth after answering a call for aid, keeping the people’s spirits up even as their chances for escaped dimmed.

Beric wasn’t sure why the Night King didn’t attack, didn’t kill them all. Instead he kept them trapped. Meera had guessed, “He wants us for his army. I’m sure we’ll be dead and risen soon enough.”

She’d said it with such authority and deep sadness than no one had thought to question it.

Tormund paced, the free man not liking staying in walls. Out of all them, he was strangely the most optimistic. “King Crow will come,” he’d insisted. “He will come with his Dragon Queen.”

Beric wasn’t so sure, but he remembered the rescue beyond the wall just as the wilding did. It had been something of a miracle. A legend come true. Beric had seen much in his many lives, but nothing topped dragons. He had felt relief that almost beat even the first time he’d been brought back by the Lord of the Light.

Even as he wondered if she couldn’t have come just one night sooner and saved Thoros as well.

Then again, staring at the undead dragon that had resulted because of said rescue, perhaps it would be best if the queen kept her dragons back. Still, Tormund was certain that Jon Snow would come and save them. Beric wondered what inspired the wildling’s confidence in a man who had once been his enemy.

He was certain there was a story, but no one had been much for stories in these dark days. Not with the wall falling and being trapped here. Beric felt the weight of this being his last life, but he was certain he wouldn’t met his end here. The Lord of the Light had a greater purpose for him. He had been brought back so many times because of some grand design. He was certain it was not yet his time to die.

Not with the Battle for the Dawn just beginning. The Seven Kingdoms needed warriors desperately to survive and Beric would proudly be among them.

But none of that faith helped him figure out a way out of this keep. Ned Umber had pointed out several different passages, and they had attempted to slowly evacuate people, but the Night King had noticed one family’s escape and had used his dragon to ignite a barrier around the keep to stop any additional escapes.

So now they sat, watching their meager food stores disappear. If what Meera had said was right, the Night King was doing a good job killing them slowly. They’d starve within a month or so. Beric could already see the hunger affecting the little ones.

It seemed a cruelty, but their enemy was not human, ice monsters who were true enemies of the warriors of light and fire. Beric gave away most of his food portions to children. He huddled with Tormund and Meera, discussing ways to stay alive just one more day.
They didn’t have the weapons to attack. They didn’t have the fighters either. They could only hope to outlast

Meera sighed, “I just wish we could know what the Night King was planning. See the bigger picture.” Tears filled the girl’s eyes. “I miss Jojen. He’d know what was happening.”

Tormund looked to Beric. He explained what he knew, “Jojen was her brother.”

The wilding nodded. Meera, when her crying had slowed, explained further, “Jojen was a greenseer. He died beyond the wall.”

That surprised Beric. “What were you doing beyond the wall?”

“Escorting Bran Stark to the three-eyed raven. Jojen said it had to be done. That the fate of humanity depended on it.” Her gaze hardened as she looked to the dying fire in the hearth. “I’m not so sure. I think Jojen’s skills would have been more useful than some selfish boy.”

Sensing it was a sore topic, Beric dropped it. Tormund didn’t, a curious look on his face. “Where did you find this raven?”

Meera shook her head. “I’m not sure. He was in a cave past a frozen lake.”

Tormund pressed, “Could you find it again?”

“I doubt it. It wouldn’t matter now anyway. That raven is dead. The Night King and his army showed up and destroyed him and the children of the forest who remained with him.”

Beric’s eyes widened. The children of the forest? They were still around? Beric struggled to remember the tales he’d been told by his old nan about the children and the first men.

If he’d known just how important childhood stories would be in his adult life, he might have paid them more attention.

Softly, Meera added, “The children of the forest raised the Night King to kill the first men. They didn’t know how well their plan would work.”

Finished talking, the young lady busied herself by sharpening her weapon with a whetstone. Beric took the hint and stopped Tormund from continuing his questioning.

Silence reigned, but for the sound of steel against stone. A noise from behind the stone wall broke it further.

The noise caused the men to stand, ready to defend. The woman wrapped their arms around their cowering children, ready to protect them. Beric took out his sword and ignited it. He would not die here. Today was not the day he would meet his end.

A hidden panel appeared and was pushed aside, opening to a dark tunnel. A small boy entered the room, appearing as if from magic. “Ned?”

But behind the boy was an even bigger surprise: Jon Snow, King in the North.
“We’re entering the New Gift,” Arya yelled over the whip of wind.

She was riding a dragon. A real dragon. She was flying.

As much as part of her still thought she should have chased after Jon, she couldn’t make herself regret this. This was everything she’d imagined all those years pretending to be Visenya Targaryen.

Daenerys nodded. Arya studied the queen for a moment. She had the perfect Targaryen looks – platinum hair and violet eyes, but Arya just couldn’t see Visenya, instead she saw Rhaenys. At least that had been Arya’s first impression. Watching her more, she was beginning to believe the rumors that Daenerys was actually Aegon reborn.

Besides, considering Rhaenys had died after being shot out of the sky when flying her dragon, Arya didn’t want Daenerys to share the fate of her ancestor.

The green dragon dipped under them, its wings latching up. The dragon they rode followed his brother’s actions. Daenerys called out, “We’re approaching something. Prepare yourselves.”

Arya thatched her bow, ready to fire upon the army her brother had warned everyone about. Arya’s arms were steady, her gaze focused. She was ready.

The dragons dipped beneath the clouds and at once they could see it: the army of the dead. Arya had thought herself prepared for the sight. Jon had told her what to expect and she trusted him completely, but seeing an army span leagues, a rotting army shuffled by White Walkers with their unnatural glowing blue eyes.

Arya could feel her blood run cold. She shook the feeling away as best she could, but she could still the despair at the edge of her consciousness, so like when she’d seen her father lose his head.

An arrow flew and Arya focused again using her mantra of names: The Hound, still alive, but no longer an enemy.

The queen commanded, “Dracarys.”

The air around them ignited as the dragon spewed fire, Arya could feel the scorching flames surround them, could feel it licking her skin unpleasantly.

Meryn Trant. Dead – she had slit his throat in Braavos. She let another arrow lose.

Something flew in the air, and the dragon banked, causing most of the men to yell out and grasp the dragon more tightly. Arya ignored all of this, finding another target.

Cersei Lannister. Still alive – a state that would be remedied soon enough.

Daenerys guided her dragon into another pass, Arya saw the green one darting in the corner of her vision, burning what the beast could of the army while dodging spears and arrows being hurled at it.

Joffrey. That cunt had died at his own wedding. Payback for the Red Wedding, Arya thought, no little shit of a king ever deserved it more.

The men were shouting behind her, as Arya loosed another arrow. It missed its target as the dragon banked hard again.

Arya lost her seat, nearly falling off, but a pair of small, but strong hands held on tightly to her.
Arya turned her head to see the pretty face of the queen looking back at her. “Hold on,” the queen instructed to her.

Ilyn Payne. He would die soon enough.

The dragon made one more pass, the beast’s flames were more than uncomfortable this time around. The heat too much, but Arya fought through it, aiming another arrow, this time going for a White Walker.

Polliver. Dead, by her own hand.

The blue eyes stared back at her. Arya’s eyes narrowed in hatred. Her hatred was her fuel.

The Mountain. A monster now, undead just like the enemy her brother and now she fought.

Arya breathed out and let her arrow fly.

Rorge. Dead.

The arrow hit the White Walker in the shoulder. He stared at Arya even as the dragon carried her away. It felt as though the Walker was looking into and chilling her very soul.

Walder Frey. Winter had come for him and his accursed family.

The White Walker grasped the shaft of the arrow in his hand.

Tywin Lannister. Dead, killed by his own son.

The arrow disintegrated in the White Walker’s hands.

Melisandre. For Gendry, who was not family, but a good friend. Arya considered him like family.

They flew above the clouds now, out of sight of the army. The rest were still yelling, but Arya ignored them, finishing her list.

Beric Dondarrion. Gendry had forgiven him, but Arya had not.

Daenerys’ voice broke through her concentration. “Careful. You’re injured, my lady.”

Was she? Now that the queen said it, her side ached. She felt the flesh looking for blood, but met instead with the raised, blistered skin that indicated a burn.

Throros of Myr. Gendry had told her he’d froze beyond the wall.

Now that she felt the pain, Arya could feel little else. She looked around to see burn blisters on all the men and Brienne to differing degrees.

The queen looked completely unaffected. Arya’s brow furrowed. Was this the power of the Targaryens? Was this the magic of the blood of Valyria?

Arya was not certain, but she could almost hear the queen’s whispered words to herself, “I’ve done my part. Now it’s your turn, Jon. Try not to die.”
Tormund was the first to approach him, clasping him tightly. Jon returned the gesture, glad to see his friend alive. “Finally unburied yourself from that fiery cunt did you?”

Jon knew who Tormund was talking about. He hoped no one else did. “What is wrong with you?” he asked with a hint of disgust.

“A lot,” he answered honestly. “These days these dead fuckers are my main problem.”

The corners of Jon’s mouth lifted. “I’ve missed you, you mad ginger.”

“That mean you want to suck my cock, King Crow?” Tormund looked Jon up and down. “You’re pretty enough for me. Won’t be my best though.” Tormund grinned and Jon nearly rolled his eyes. Tormund and his fucking bear.

“Maybe I didn’t miss you.”

Tormund gave a deep belly laugh at that, stepping back so that Jon could address the company. Jon could see combinations of awe and surprise. It made him feel uncomfortable, he’d spent so much of his life going unnoticed. But he refused to show that on his face. He looked to Beric and Meera, who seemed to be the ones in charge. The official Lord Reed stood behind them, looking his age. Jon felt a wave a sympathy for the boy. He understood too well that feeling that other better men should be in charge, if they’d lived.

His Lord Father or his noble brother, for example. Jon pushed such thoughts aside. He bent down to speak with the leaders softly, “We have a band of men here to rescue you. A combination of north men and crows.”

Jon could see the relief pass over everyone. He didn’t feel it. They hadn’t done anything yet. This may be a terrible idea. He might just be building the Night King’s army. Tormund asked, “Where’s your Dragon Queen?”

“She’s off burning the undead army while we keep the dragon occupied.” At least, Jon hoped that’s where she was. He’d kept one eye to the sky the entire trip here, wondering if she would chase after him on Drogon’s back. He hoped not; he wasn’t ready to see her yet.

But it appeared Tyrion had successfully talked her down this time. Part of Jon couldn’t help but worry a little at that. There would be no last minute rescue from Daenerys, not this time.

He hoped she was safe. He didn’t want to think about what it would mean if she died and he lived. He didn’t know if he could bear it. He hadn’t even had the courage to say good-bye. What had his last words to her been? Something official and meaningless said at the end of a meeting with the northern lords.

Jon shook the thoughts away, this was not the time. He could worry about that later. He could add that to his list of worries along with how to get past the truth of his existence. He pushed it all down now. He had to be focused on the Night King. He looked around at the worried children, who looked at him like some hero or savior.

No pressure there, Jon thought.

Beric asked, “So how are you planning to take out a dragon?”

“I’m not,” Jon answered honestly. “We’re going distract and confuse the Night King and his dragon as best we can while everyone gets out of here. We can afford to lose a keep. We cannot afford to lose any man, woman or child.”
The king took out a dragonglass dagger, drawing a rough sketch of Last Hearth in the dirt, going over the plan. When he finished, he asked, “Has the Night King managed to raise any wights?”

It was another way of asking how many had died.

“26 men, five women and six children,” Meera answered. “The men and women are mostly shut out in the courtyard, but the children sometimes make their way in.” She nodded her head to indicate the pile of ashes a few feet from one of the windows.

Jon nodded solemnly. He stood. “We’ll all take position and begin our attack shortly. Who should lead the people out?”

“I will,” the young lord stepped forward. “They are my people. I shall lead them.”

Jon placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder and squeezed. “Good man.”

The boy smiled, giving Jon a look of admiration that unsettled him. He was used to lords looking down on him, not up to him. He let go and ordered. “Let’s get into position.”

He made his way to where he was to be positioned, speaking with every man of his he came across. Meera had asked to be placed next to him, and he saw no reason to deny the request. They sat, waiting for the signal to begin their attack.

“You look a bit like your brothers,” she said to him.

“Brothers?” Jon was aware that Meera knew Bran, but who else had she met?

“Bran and Rickon, I mean.”

The name made Jon’s insides seize up. He could never forget how he’d failed his youngest brother. Cousin. He could not fail any more of his family now. He said nothing to her in response and she seemed to understand.

They sat in silence for a moment before she asked, “How did you know that way in and out? Not even Lord Umber knew it existed.”

“Not to offend, Lady Reed, but lords and ladies know their homes well, but servants and bastards know it best.”

“Why do you say that?” Jon could tell that Meera was repressing any anger from her voice.

The King looked at her, “How many times did you have to hide in your own home? Duck into some dark corner? How many times did you have to disappear within these walls?”

Meera nodded, lost in her own thoughts. He was certain this time trapped was hellish for them all. He readied himself for the attack as Meera thatched a bow. What was it with women and bows? Jon thought.

His muscles tensed and his vision narrowed as he waited. This time before a battle, Jon both relished and hated it. He never as focused as directly before the chaos of battle overwhelmed them, before the careful plan had a chance to fall apart. Before anyone had a chance to die and courage was tested and called upon. The air was electric with what was about to happen but nothing had actually happened yet.

It made Jon’s blood sing, but he didn’t like it. He didn’t like how well he was suited for battle,
didn’t like being a natural warrior. He wished he had built for love, to take a wife and have children. 

He missed Daenerys desperately in that moment. He wanted to make it back to her alive. What did it matter if he had a claim to the throne? What did any of it matter? He wanted her. She wanted him. It was that simple. Fuck the politics. Fuck the throne. He wanted her. He loved her. He would happily spend the rest of his days worshipping her, if she let him. He would worship her even if she did turn from him. He would live to make sure no harm came to her. He would protect her no matter what.

He would live today. He would win and return to the woman he loved. 

Jon’s resolve steeled and he saw the flash of light that meant it had started. He stepped forward to kill the wight they had stalked out. Meera took out another that was near-by. Then they both ducked behind pillars as the blue flames reached them.

The flames were odd, unnatural. They burned so hot they chilled Jon, in a similar way to how the air could be so biting and cold that it would burn. He let them pass around him, hoping the stone pillar wouldn’t collapse and leave him exposed or crushed.

But the flames were short-lived. As planned, the attack had come from all sides at once and the Night King didn’t know where to focus his dragon. The creature spit flame in every direction.

Jon watched as a steel cable flew over the dragon and its mount. That was the key to the plan. They wanted to trap the dragon here. Bolt it down, so it couldn’t fly off and kill the very people they were risking their lives to save.

He doubted it would last long, but every second gave the people of Last Hearth a better chance for escape. The dragon raged at the chain, and the next that flew over him.

The Night King appeared as calm as ever, one swipe of his spear and the chains broke apart as if made of glass rather than the strongest iron with some dragonglass melted in. But apparently not enough of the black mineral had been included.

Shit, Jon thought. That was supposed to last a little longer than that. The dragon rose up, and Jon could feel the panic. No, the Night King would see. Jon watched carefully, ready to jump out if the Night King looked in the direction of those escaping.

He did. Meera jumped out before Jon had a chance. “No,” she called out. She pulled out her sword. “No. You will not hurt them. The North is my home. I will defend it.”

Jon slipped out behind her, pulling out his own sword. He could see all of the warriors step out, if it was courage or stupidity, Jon couldn’t be sure.

The Night King’s eyes connected with Jon’s. The dragon spewed its blue fire.

Jon ducked out of the way, taking shelter once more, but this time the flame was steady. He could feel the pillar buckle beneath his back. Jon knew he had nowhere to go to escape the crumbling fortress, nowhere but into the cold fire.

The fire stopped suddenly and the dragon roared. Jon took the opportunity to leap out, dodging the falling rocks of the now crumpled structure.

He saw a bolt lodged in the dragon’s shoulder. Jon wished he’d seen who’d thrown it, which man (or woman) had managed to fell the dragon. Because the dragon was descending, carefully, but
unmistakably.

Still the Night King looked unworried, as the great beast touched down, throwing flame once more, catching a few men this time, Jon noticed. The Night King leaned forward to touch the hilt of the spear. It crumbled under his touch.

Jon lifted his sword, running to the dragon, ready to slash at it with his sword. Dragons were not unkillable. They could die. Even if it had to be a death of a thousand cuts, Jon would fight this monster.

A wight slowed his progress, Jon took care of it quickly, barely stopping. The dragon’s head whipped around, its flames coming once more. Jon out ran them, just barely, but he did it.

Jon could feel the Night King’s gaze on him. Good. Let the others live. Let them have a chance to take this monster out before the war could consume them all. Jon had died once before. He would not die again, not this day. He raised Longclaw, and charged again.

This time he managed to strike the dragon, though his blade first bounced off the toughness of dragonscale. The second blow was more well-thought out, and Jon plunged his blade into a chink between two scales.

The dragon roared, and Jon barely managed to hold onto to his sword, pulling it back with all his strength as the dragon reared back. The motion caused even more to the dragon’s sensitive flesh under his scales.

The Night King was scowling at Jon now. The dragon once more turned to him, and Jon prepared to leap out of the way once more, when the unthinkable happened.

An arrow appeared in the Night King’s arm, piercing it through so that Jon could see its dragonglass tip. Rider and mount whipped around to the direction of the bolt and Jon saw that it had come from Meera Reed.

No.

Jon began to run, desperate to save the brave girl. He yelled out for her to get out of the way.

But it was too late, and blue fire surrounded her.

Jon stopped, glancing at the other men, the other warriors with him. Had it been long enough? Had the rest of the keep escaped?

Jon wasn’t sure but he gave the order anyway. “Leave all of you!”

He faced the Night King, who removed the arrow that had struck him with an undisguised digest. Jon twirled Longclaw as he readied himself to face off against his enemy. To buy his warriors time to escape.

Tormund, Edd and Beric still remained, each man taking a direction, attacking and retreating from the dragon, helping Jon out, which Jon supposed shouldn’t surprise him. Despite his orders, those men wanted him alive.

The three men took turns, but it was only a matter of time before the dragon got them all.

Until Jon saw something over the lip of Last Hearth, something he could barely believe. He signaled the other three men to his side.
They had to focus the dragon’s attention here at him. If what he was seeing was real, it may be their only chance of winning.

Rhaegal was still restless, constantly pulling away from her. Daenerys didn’t understand why. Drogon seemed to understand though. He chirped to his brother, as if annoyed. Rhaegal growled back.

Daenerys could tell the noise was bothering the rest with her. They were tending their wounds, silent after the attack. The noise was bothering and unsettling them, Daenerys could tell.

She tried to quiet her children, but they wouldn’t be silenced. Rhaegal’s head kept turning east. Daenerys wondered what called to her dragon from there.

She feared it was Last Hearth.

Was Rhaegal picking up on her worry for Jon? Was he sensing his fallen brother in that direction? Daenerys worried what such things could mean.

This only agitated Rhaegal more. He kept pulling away, both in their connection and physically. His flight pattern going more eastward with every league. Daenerys tried to rein him in, and it would work for a time until he began to drift again.

Finally, he roared and broke away. Daenerys reached for him, but he ignored her. She let him go. From Drogon, she found that his feeling at the outburst would have been an eye roll had he been human. He wasn’t confused by Rhaegal’s behavior the way she was, just annoyed.

“Where’s that one going?”

Daenerys wasn’t sure, but she didn’t think it prudent to admit that to this company. She stayed silent. Dragons didn’t answer to men or gods.

Cornered with three men he’d fought with before by his side, Jon adjusted the grip on his sword, he saw a movement in the background but didn’t react to it. His focus stayed on the Night King. The unnatural blue eyes stared into his, and Jon felt like the cold seeped into his very bones.

The undead dragon opened its jaws and Jon could see the blue flame ignite.

Another dragon popped up, as silent as Jon’s direwolf, to clamp its jaws down on the throat of its former brother. Jon had watched the green dragon climb down the wall for its ambush and was happy to have served as its distraction. He willed the dragon to take out its brother, end the war here. Or at least strike a devastating first blow.

But the Night King, scowling, brought out a spear, forcing the green dragon to let go and duck his throw. The dragon shifted its body around as smoothly as serpent to attack the other side, but this time the undead mount was ready and snapped back.
Jon watched the great beasts fight, he and the men with him, ducking out of the way when needed. Jon wondered if there was any way he could help. His eyes kept flickering to the sky. Was Daenerys up there with her other dragon?

Rhaegal dodged a blast of blue flame and rising onto his wings, kicked out with his hind feet. But it wasn’t a kick, Jon realized, instead it had been a grab. The dragon had been clawing. And the dragon had hit his target.

What used to be Viserion screamed out in pain, though no blood poured from the fresh wound, only a gaping hole remained where a blue eye once was. Jon smirked while the Night King was forced to retreat with his dragon, taking to unsteady flight while Jon watched and Rhaegal crushed the flesh and eye still in his claws.

But the Night King did not leave, he merely raised his dragon into the sky, blotting out the sun. Jon’s eyes adjusted quickly to the sudden darkness, but he didn’t see what the Night King had done in that time. The dragon flew away but the sun stayed dark. The landscape appeared as it would at night without the moon and stars.

Jon’s blood chilled at the sight.

Who knew that the Long Night was a literal interpretation? It was one thing for the Night King to have power over the dead, but the sun as well?

The dragon beside him roared, and Jon couldn't be certain, but Rhaegal sounded scared. He saw the undead dragon fly away and the green one flapped his wings, as if it was going to give chase, but it was too late. The Night King was gone. Rhaegal breathed fire, burning Last Hearth around them, as it roared in anger and fear.

The dragon wasn't alone. Jon couldn't move in his terror aside from a tremble he couldn't control. Once glance at Beric, Edd and Tormund, who he could only see by the flame of Beric’s sword, showed the same fear on their faces. How in the seven hells did the Night King overtake the fucking sun? What happened now? How did one bring back the dawn?

How did one beat an evil they couldn't even understand?

The sellsword looked to his benefactor, actual fear on his face, "Exactly what kind of fight are you bringing me to?"

The golden lion looked around at the darkened northern landscape, "The kind where when they tell tales of it thousands of years from now, it will be dismissed as nonsense only children believe."

Strange, the drunk queen thought, looking out the window at King's Landing, which was completely darkened. Winter was here, so it was natural for the days to be shorter. But it had been light out moments ago.
Then she heard the cries of the people, screams of fear, strong and loud enough to reach her in the high tower of her chambers. She took a sip of wine.

No matter, the mad queen thought. I have enemies to destroy, darkness or not.

The great White Wolf looked up where the sun had been just moments before, not understanding what had happened, but understood something terrible was happening.

He lifted his head and howled.

A common boy working in the kitchens walked out to empty chamber pots. He’s surprised to find it dark out. It was still mid-day, wasn’t it? He looked up to find the sun just wasn’t there. No stars or moon shone either. It was strange and he could feel an odd, evil magic in the air.

He hurried back inside and went back to making his pies. He didn’t understand what was happening in the greater world, but he understood how to do that much.

A girl thought she’d seen so much. She’d seen men lose their faces, she’d been stabbed, and she’d sought revenge to all the wrongs that had happened to her family. Now she rode a dragon like the warrior queens of old.

But never had she felt a terror like the one she felt when the sun disappeared.

A bastard blacksmith worked over the intense heat of a forge. He heard cries from the courtyard, and curious, walked out to view for himself. He hoped it would be the black dragon returning with a small girl he’d known that was now a fetching young lady.

Not that he would admit that out loud.

He was surprised not to find a dragon, but rather darkness. An unnatural night that had covered the land. He thought it would be something to remember, where he was when this happened, a story to tell any children he might have in the future.
A lady looked out over Winterfell, missing her family. The warriors off fighting and her other brother here, but not really. She was home, but it wasn’t the same warm place of her childhood memories. Too many terrible things had happened, too many would never come back.

As if the darkness of her thoughts made themselves corporeal, darkness covered Winterfell. It took her a moment to realize it wasn’t a trick, night had really fallen mid-day.

One question consumed her thoughts above all others – was her family safe?

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A dwarf walked along the ramparts, trying to get warm. It was like being on the Wall again. His balls were probably the size of marbles. So he was outside when it happened. He noticed the darkness surround him before he thought to look up.

He watched the sun disappear, but he still couldn’t believe it.

“Fuck me.”

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An onion knight dropped his dagger. He was no fighter, but with all the training happening around him and another war coming, he figured it wouldn’t hurt to learn a few moves.

But he wasn’t prepared for the sudden darkness in the courtyard. He saw the children he’d been practicing with panic at the sight, felt the same emotion fill his breast. But he pushed it down and walked over to reassure the little ones that their king would protect them.

The former smuggler just wished he knew if that was actually true, or if the king was already dead.

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A former slave felt a chill crawl over her skin, causing her to pull her wrap tighter. The sun’s rays, which had warmed her just moments before, were gone now. She looked up and was surprised to find only darkness in the sky.

What had happened to her queen?

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The Dragon Queen was not unfamiliar with magic. She had watched it kill her first husband and child. She seen it in the House of Undying as a result of her kidnapped dragons. She felt it firsthand
every time she stepped into a fire.

But this magic felt older and stronger than anything she’d known before.

Aware of the people behind her, possibly looking to her, she showed no fear, stiffening her spine and narrowing her eyes. Her dragon roared in response, throwing fire to where the sun had been.

Bran Stark, not the three-eyed raven, looked up to watch the sun be consumed by darkness.

He said, “And so the Long Night is here and the Battle for the Dawn begins.”
I feel some real sympathy for George and now really understand why it takes him so damn long to write one of these books. Because I’m just trying to write a simple love story for my ship, but then all these other storylines need to be addressed since they come into play later. It’s hard and time consuming.

Basically, sorry for the long wait. Hope it was worth it and thank you for your patience/support! On a positive note, the next update shouldn't be quite so long a wait (fingers crossed).

Bran sat in his wheeled chair, feeling completely useless. She had died and he could do nothing. Meera, a girl who’d protected him, a girl who’d saved him, a girl who’d been forced to leave her brother behind for his sake, had died and what could he do about it?

He’d watched. That’s all he did now. He watched life happen around him, unable to take part in it himself. He lost himself in the past because he could only watch the present. He’d been told that he would play a key role in this war, first by Jojen then the last three-eyed raven, but so far all he had done was make Jon Snow run away.

Bran remembered the dreams he’d had a child, ones where he was a knight leading charges against their enemy. Fate had held different ideas for him, but why give him this power only to blind him when it was needed most?

The three-eyed raven could see nothing of the Night King or his army. The sight was hidden from him, as if the blackness that had covered the land covered his visions as well. It scared Bran. He had one job, one duty to save his people, and he couldn’t do it.

There must be another way. There must be some other method to see more. Bran had to find it. He had to help his family beat the Night King. He had to help the North and the other six kingdoms survive.

“Hello,” a silky voice interrupted his thoughts.

Bran looked up and found the one they called the Spider approaching him. He’d seen this man much in his visions. Almost never in the forefront, but lurking in the dark corners like the animal he was named after. He survived much. He knew much.

But the three-eyed raven knew more. A thousand eyes, and one.

Varys sat gracefully across from Bran Stark, keeping his arms folded and hidden within his sleeves. He spoke kindly, “I’m not sure we’ve ever met, but I’m Lord Varys.”

Bran said nothing, letting the man talk. Varys often had clever words planned to say to people before he actually met them. Bran wanted to hear what had been prepared for him. The words were not what Bran expected.

“I despise magic. I spent a decade building a spy network, one so powerful that monarch after
monarch needed my skills despite any personal feelings towards me or rumors that surrounded me. And you…” Varys stared at Bran. “You take hold of a tree trunk and learn in minutes the greatest secret in the realm, one even my considerable talents couldn’t suss out – the identity of the woman who made Ned Stark set aside his honor.”

Bran could feel himself retreating and the three-eyed raven returning. Part of him wanted to stop it, wanted to stay the boy he’d been, but that boy could not face the spider. Varys stared at him, searching for some weakness, some way to use him. Bran felt the bark beneath his fingertips, could feel himself getting lost in the past.

At least he could still do this. He searched through memories that were not his own. When he returned, the Spider was still studying him carefully. Bran turned away from the man. He stared into the pool, as he said, his emotion gone again, “The dragons will rise again.”

Varys stiffened. “What?”

“That’s what you heard in the flames.” If Varys looked nervous before he looked downright scared now. Bran continued, “You built a life around those words. You assisted the Targaryens even as you served the man who destroyed them. You bought three dragon eggs and gave them to your friend Illyrio to place in the hands of your queen. And with your touches, the dragons did rise again.” Bran’s dead eyes connected with Varys. “But you didn’t know everything. You still don’t, even with all your little birds.”

Bran went back to the tree. “The flames did not lie, I think. The dragons will rise again. They have walked through fire and come out stronger than they’ve ever been. The Targaryens are the Valyrian swords of this world: rare, beautiful, deadly and mostly gone. And they just might save us all.”

Varys questioned, “So you support the queen?”

Bran answered, “I support the rightful heir to the Iron Throne.”

“Clever answer,” Varys observed, his composure back now. “Too clever perhaps. Almost like you’re hiding something. A bigger secret than the identity of Jon Snow’s mother. What would cause the king to flee? I have wondered. He is a brave man after all. It seems strange that he would flee from the woman he loves to certain death upon learning his heritage. It seems like an overreaction. Unless there was something more to learn than a mother’s name.”

Bran said nothing.

Varys let the topic drop. “Lord Tyrion fears that Lord Snow has died in his quest to free Last Hearth. That this darkness is connected to it.” He left it unsaid that he wasn’t so sure.

“Jon Snow lives,” Bran confirmed. “He will return to Winterfell.” That wasn’t certain, but he was tired and wanted this conversation to end.

Varys wasn’t finished though. “How far can you see into the past?”

“Why?”

“We’ve fought this enemy before. We should already know how to win.”

Bran wasn’t sure if he could back that far. But why not? He’d seen the Children of the Forest, seen the Night King’s origins. Why shouldn’t he be able to see the end of the first Long Night? Why shouldn’t he have that power?
“Leave me,” he commanded.

Varys obeyed with a bow.

Tyrion was relieved to see the dragon appear, in the dark it was hard to see, but he was pretty sure the telltale white hair was one of the shapes on the back of Drogon. He hoped his queen had survived this…event.

She was the first to climb off, turning back to help the rest. Tyrion kept back to allow her room to unload everyone. He noticed they everyone but the queen looked injured.

“You’re safe,” Tyrion sighed out. He looked up to the sky. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” Daenerys answered tightly.

Tyrion watched as Drogon lifted up. The dragon threw a fireball as soon as it was in the air, creating a temporary sun for them all, but it burned out as quickly as it appeared. Tyrion could only guess where the black dragon had gone. Such an element of surprise might work to their advantage, he thought.

But who knew what other tricks this Night King had up his sleeve?

Tyrion approached Daenerys fully now, who was speaking with those she’d flown with. Tyrion could see now that the injuries were burns. Apparently the Targaryen tolerance to fire was an important element to their dragon riding. Most of the party hobbled off in the direction of healers, but the Dothraki and Arya Stark seemed determined to stay by the queen’s side.

Tyrion was pleased to see that at least one more Stark was finally starting to like the Queen. It might help convince the northerners to follow the queen in their most desperate hour. He’d already received reports from Varys of northern men and women wanting to pack up and return to protect their homes. He immediately reached out to these people to inform them that they could not hold up in the castles to defeat this supernatural enemy.

He was dismissed as a Lannister, a blood traitor and worst of all, a dwarf.

No matter what he did, it always came back to that. Tyrion squinted, checking for a sign of the green dragon. “Where’s the other dragon?”

“Away,” Daenerys responded.

Tyrion saw no reason to question this, accepting it at face value. Daenerys turned to Arya, “You should see to those burns, Lady Stark.”

“Lady Stark is my sister,” Arya responded.

“So what title would you have me call you then?”

“I don’t give a rip about titles.”

Daenerys smirked, “You remind me of your brother.”
Tyrion watched the exchange, encouraged. It was only one northerner, but it showed the power of battle. The importance of bonds forged when two different people fought side-by-side. At the Battle of Blackwater Bay, he hadn’t been Imp, but Half Man, which was still a bit insulting but hadn’t meant to be.

He watched the women walk to the maester, hanging back a bit. They had more ahead of them now than ever before, and he wasn’t sure how to plan for magic snow zombies. Never would have he seen blotting out the sun as one of his enemy’s strategies.

He wondered if there was a book out there somewhere in the great wide world entitled, “Night Kings, Their Undead Armies and How to Defeat Them.” If there was, he would pay a great deal of gold for it.

The maester fussed over the Stark girl once they arrived, and Daenerys left the grumbling girl with a small smile. Tyrion felt a little bad that he’d have to be the one to bring her back to the reality of their situation, the terrible reality.

“So, you don’t know what happened to the sun?”

“No,” Daenerys answered with a sigh.

“Well, I think we can safely assume the Night King had something to do with it.”

“Aye,” Daenerys agreed, using a northern term Tyrion had never heard from her before. He wasn’t sure if that was a good or bad sign.

He moved forward, “When you say Rhaegal is away, where exactly is he?”

“I’m not sure about that either.”

“So, we’re missing a dragon, we’re missing a king, and the sun has disappeared. Not a great start to the war.”

Daenerys frowned at him. Tyrion couldn’t see the look, but he was sure it was there. “The dragon, the king, and the sun will all return,” Daenerys said with an authority that only a queen could possess.

“Is that what you’re planning on telling the northern lords?”

Daenerys sighed again. “Have they already decided this is all my fault somehow?”

“Worse, they are panicking and preparing to leave, return to their castles.”

That statement gained Daenerys’ full attention. “We need to find Lady Stark. We cannot let such a thing happen. We are strongest together.”

The queen began to walk to Winter Town where the lords were gathering up their armies, and Tyrion, once he found someone to fetch Lady Stark, followed. He observed the queen more closely now. She no longer looked like the perfect queen, as she had the look of dried sweat leftover from the battle, her hair was frizzled, and some ashes dusted her, giving her a more worn and dirty look. It actually was possibly the messiest he’d ever seen her.

But Tyrion thought it could work to their advantage. This clearly wasn’t a queen that sat on her throne while others fought her battles for her. If the last two Kings in the Norths had proven anything it was that northerners preferred their leaders to be fighters.
He put these thoughts aside, as he had more questions for her, “So how many did you manage to burn away?”

“I’m not sure,” she answered. “Hundreds, maybe thousands, but not nearly enough before the spears started flying.”

Tyrion nodded, expecting the answer, but still not liking it. “So we’re still facing an army of 100,000?”

Daenerys’ voice softened and Tyrion thought he could detect real fear, “Give or take.”

Tyrion held in a curse. It would do no good to despair. “How are we planning on stopping them?”

Tyrion could see the frustration on his queen’s face, but her tone barely betrayed her feelings, “I’m not sure. The army will probably head for the Dreadfort next. We’ll have to take an accounting of what we have and what we need. Are the Dothraki armed?”

“In the few hours you’ve been gone? Doubtful.”

Daenerys stopped a moment to give her Hand a look. Tyrion wasn’t entirely sure if it was amusement or astonishment at his bad taste. Her eyes then drifted to the empty, dark sky. “Is that all it’s been?”

Tyrion suspected that was the closest thing to fear the queen would dare show in public. “Yes,” he said despite knowing the question had been rhetorical. “It’ll come back. All we have to do is defeat the Night King, and it will come back.”

“Is that all?” Daenerys sighed before her eyes returned to Tyrion’s. “What have you told the northern lords? No reason to repeat your words to them.”

“I told them the truth. We fight together or we die apart. This is the only shot we’ll have.”

“It’s hard to understand when you haven’t seen it. Many of these lords don’t know…” She looked down at Tyrion. “You haven’t seen it. What makes you understand?”

“I trust you. And Jon Snow. And the late Lord Commander Mormont. I believe your words as much as my eyes. Besides, I did see the wight.” Daenerys thought over his words. Tyrion continued, knowing his additional words might not be welcome, “I don’t believe that’s the problem though.” Daenerys’ eyebrow lifted. “I believe the problem isn’t that they don’t understand. They understand fine. The sun going out showed them the power of the enemy they face. They understand; that’s why they are terrified. They are panicking. They don’t need to understand.”

“They need to find their courage,” Daenerys finished for him, nodding. Tyrion nodded in response, confirming her response. They began walking again, at a brisker pace and no more words were exchanged.

Winter Town was much changed from when Tyrion had last visited. It was overflowing with people now, reminding Tyrion more of King’s Landing then anywhere in the North. Most of the people were rushing around, preparing to leave, no doubt, but they stopped to stare at the Dragon Queen.

Tyrion wondered how Daenerys grew accustomed to it; he never had. They followed behind, mostly commoners as Daenerys made her way through the town to where she’d been informed the lords and ladies of the north were gathered.
She paused at an intersection, and Tyrion guided her left without making it obvious. She followed his instruction, making her way to the leaders.

They had gathered in Winter Town’s square, ordering their men to pack and informing them all they were going home. Tyrion watched the queen steel herself before making her way over to the northern lords. “What’s the meaning of this?” she asked in a clear, commanding voice.

Men stopped what they were doing to stare at the queen. Tyrion watched those who’d followed them here fill out the outer edges of the square. This would be an important moment. This might just win or lose the war for them.

He tried not to be nervous on behalf of his queen. He’d seen her beat long odds before, watched her face down men who hated her. She could do this.

She would do this.

Lord Robett Glover stepped forward, singling himself out as the leader. “We are leaving, your grace. We must see to our homes and our people.”

“You are needed here. Here is where you will best help your people and best defend your homes.”

A mummer of protest met this announcement. “How is it that? How do we best protect our people a hundred miles away from them?”

Daenerys softened her look, a first in front of the lords. She looked like the young woman she actually was, not the Dragon Queen. Tyrion wondered if that was really the best move. She said, “I understand. It’s hard to lead. It’s hard to know what the right thing is. To carry the responsibility of protecting your people.” She took a step forward. “The right thing is to stick together. We can only beat this evil together.” Her eyes swept over the crowd. “The enemy is great; we must be just as great to defeat it. One army, united against our common enemy. Our differences are nothing. They aren’t important. Living, surviving, that’s what matters. I can’t promise you victory, but I can promise you a chance.” Daenerys’ eyes met Lord Glover’s again. “Together.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Tyrion saw Lady Stark enter the square, watching the queen. A mummer could be heard throughout the crowd, but Lord Glover stayed stubborn. “You are not my leader. You are not my queen. I only bow to one ruler, the King in the North.”

Tyrion watched Daenerys clamp down on her anger. He wished they’d reported that their king had bent the knee now, but Jon Snow had left too quickly. Tyrion silently cursed the man. In a tight voice, Daenerys answered, “He’s not here. We are allies. I’m not asking you to bow to me. I’m asking you to listen.”

“Why should we listen to the Mad King’s daughter?” one voice in the crowd called out. Tyrion didn’t recognize it.

Another agreed, “We fought to overthrow the Targaryens. You can’t just pretend that you’re queen now.”

“My father was evil. I cannot make up for his actions against you and yours. I know that. But I am here now. You need my help and I need yours.”

There was a silence. Sansa Stark stepped forward. “The Queen is right. We cannot defeat the army of the dead without her.” Sansa took a deep breath. “Only a dragon can defeat a dragon. The Night King rides an undead dragon now for his mount.”
Tyrion closed his eyes against the onslaught of complaints. “And how did he get a dragon if she didn’t bring it?!” He knew what the Lady was going for by being honest, but he wondered if that was the right move. He thought back to the cliff. If only the queen had listened to him then. They may have lost the king, but Jon Snow wasn’t here anyway -- so they gained nothing at the cost of a dragon.

He stepped forward, “We cannot change the past. We can only move forward. Together we will determine a solution to this problem.”

“Our king would have never let this happen!” someone shouted. “This is what happens when an imp and women are left in charge.”

Tyrion wanted to yell back, “Well, Jon Snow fucking left, so you will just have to deal it.” But he stopped himself.

Daenerys spoke before he could, “Jon Snow left to fight the Night King. To provide a distraction so that my dragons and a small group could attack his army. It was successful.”

“A success?” Lord Glover, asked. He pointed to the sky. “You call that a success! The fucking sun is gone! Evil magic is at work here and you can do nothing against it.”

Daenerys clasped her hands together. “I don’t know how that happened. When Lord Snow returns…”

“King Snow,” someone corrected her.

Daenerys ignored them. “We won’t know any answers until Jon Snow returns. At least wait for your king’s report.”

Men and women turned to each other to talk for a moment. Daenerys met Tyrion’s eyes. He saw the glimmer of worry in them. He tried to reassure her silently.

“We must see to our homes,” Lord Glover announced.

Daenerys’ face hardened. “If you wish to leave, I will not stop you. I am no tyrant, no armored guard will imprison you here.” Daenerys took a step forward. “If it comforts you to hide behind my skirts, then do so. I shall protect you, as any good mother or queen would do.”

Tyrion saw the northern lords bristle at the implication, but Daenerys didn’t give them chance to voice their objections. “I’ve spent much time with men of the North, hearing tales of your greatness. Of your honor and bravery.” She looked pointedly at the full wagons. “This is not the North I’ve heard told of. I heard stories of great northern houses and their great deeds. Not cravens who run home to hide under their beds at the first sign of struggle. Your ancestors would be ashamed to see such actions.”

Daenerys looked to Tyrion who stepped forward. He pointed to Bryden Blackwood. “House Blackwood, you may not be a northern house, but you have blood of the First Men and still keep the old gods. Your ancestors rebelled against King Harren to aid Aegon the Conqueror. Aegon V married Black Bertha Blackwood, making Queen Daenerys Targaryen your cousin.” The heir shifted under the implications of such a statement. “Your house was the last hold out for the King in the North in the Riverlands, proving your loyalty. Would you abandon your king now?”

Tyrion’s focus shifted. He found Lady Berena Hornwood. “House Hornwood. Your good sister was starved and murdered by Ramsay Snow. Jon Snow, your proclaimed king whom you gave your allegiance to, gave you your vengeance. Righteous in Wrath, those are your house words. Would
you not even hear what he has to say?"

Now to Lord Cley Cerwyn. “Ramsay killed your father because he didn’t pay his taxes. That’s how you became the new lord. Your lands are a half day’s ride from here. Running does your people no good.”

He turned to Lord Rodrik Ryswell. “The Boltons’ most loyal bannerman. Tell me, how did that work out for you? The rumors about your daughter, your grandson. Seven hells, the most famous member of your house was a Wall deserter. Poor bastard’s probably still in the ice. This is your chance to change that reputation.”

He ended on Robett Glover, the leader speaking against Daenerys now. “Your ancestors were the winter kings during the First Long Night. Do you think they hid in their castles during that fight?”

Daenerys stepped forward again. “You are the men and women of the North. You are descendants of the First Men. Your ancestors faced this enemy, and they defeated it. They did not have dragons and Targaryens, but you will. You will have the fire and blood of Old Valyria at your side. Together we will beat this army back.”

“You can wait for your king to return or you can leave. I will not leave. I will stay and I will fight for you with the help of my foreign armies. When the Lannister army arrives from the south, they shall fight with us. For your lands. To protect you. We will fight. Will you join us or will you hide behind your castle walls and pray to the gods for victory?”

Tyrion looked over the hardened faces of the people of the North, watched them process the queen’s words. He watched the men and women look her over, covered in the dust of her burned enemies. He knew they saw that she wasn’t just giving them pretty words. She would be fighting beside them. She already was. One by one, they nodded. A few even confirming, “We will wait for the king.”

Tyrion let out a sigh. He glanced to Lady Stark who also looked relieved. The queen didn’t seem to react at all. She merely nodded and strode out of the square. Tyrion jumped to catch up with her.

When they were out of earshot from the crowd, Tyrion complimented her, “Well done, your grace.”

“To you as well, but that fight is not over. We’ve only stalled them tonight. We’ll see what tomorrow brings.”

“Still, we won this fight. That is something.”

She barely smiled at his encouragement. Behind them, they could hear a group approaching them. The queen stopped and turned. Tyrion’s gaze followed his queen’s. Sansa Stark stood there, her guard surrounding her.

Daenerys greeted her, “Lady Stark.” Sansa nodded in greeting. Daenerys then said, “Tell me what I can do to help keep the fires of Winterfell burning. We cannot have people losing faith just because of Eternal Night.”

The women walked together, going over the logistics of lighting and heating Winterfell. Tyrion interjected when necessary.
The Night King had retreated. Jon suspected the magic needed to perform an act like blotting out the sun took a lot from even the Night King and he'd been forced to leave because he'd been weakened. If Jon hadn't been so scared and surprised, he might have realized this at the time and attempted to destroy the Night King once and for all.

He suspected it would haunt him in the upcoming days that he hadn't used his best chance to stop the Night King.

He and the men with him escaped Last Hearth before the flames could grow too high. The dragon remained behind, continuing to burn the keep to the ground in its rage and fear. Jon couldn’t help but think that the dragon, while saving them, was creating another problem for him to deal with later. The northern lords would want the dragons locked up for an action like this, claiming the queen couldn’t control her beasts.

Daenerys would refuse. The lords would insist. And Jon would be caught in the middle, seeing both sides, but not able to go against his queen. He would have to think on it, come up with some solution that would make everyone, not happy, but not angry.

When they were a safe distance away, the men stopped and watched Last Hearth fall. The bright beacon of flames was almost comforting in the darkness. Jon looked to the trees, wondering which direction the people of Last Hearth had gone.

"I can't believe that fucking happened," Tormund always had a way of cutting right through the bullshit. Jon's eyes connected with his friend's. "No one's going to believe me. Just like they don't believe the stories about my bear or you rising from the dead."

Jon hoped he stopped talking there. The memory of coming back from the dead wasn’t something he could deal with right now. Edd seemed to pick up on this and the Lord Commander distracted the wilding.

Beric, more familiar than Jon with coming back from death, clapped his shoulder. “We need to find the people. Show them you’re alive and give them some comfort and reassurance.” He looked to the dark spot where the sun had been only moments before. “They will be panicking.”

Jon nodded, repressing his own fear and began to search for the people of Last Hearth. They didn’t take long to find, as they huddled together in fear at the sight of their home burning and the disappearance of the sun. To Lord Umber’s credit, he was doing his best to reassure them, but he was only a small boy, and the fear was apparent in his eyes.

Jon stepped forward and all eyes turned towards him. He met them all as best he could and said in his most commanding voice, “We march to Winterfell.”

He began the task of getting everyone on their feet, gathering what supplies they’d managed to smuggle out and ready to walk. Jon felt exhausted, but they couldn’t afford to stay here. While he suspected the Night King would return to his army, he might return to finish them off instead. It wasn’t worth the risk.

Jon had to get these people moving, away from the army marching towards them. It didn’t take too long, but it felt like an eternity before they began their march.

Jon found that the two who ended up by his side were the Neds. The servant boy who’d guided them up here on his left and Lord Ned Umber on his right, both kept glancing at him like he held
all the answers to their fears and questions.

He didn’t, but he marched forward as if he did. He wondered if this was how his own Lord Father Ned had managed in Jon’s youth. Ned having no idea what the right thing to do was but pretending for the sake of the boys watching him.

Maybe the man lied a lot more than Jon had ever suspected.

Jon guided them back to the road they’d ridden on to get here. He wondered if it might be better to keep to the woods and stay hidden, but if they came across the Army of the Dead or if the Night King returned on its undead dragon mount, they’d be screwed either way. This way he was less likely to get them lost on the way back to Winterfell and it would be the quickest.

Jon’s thoughts swirled around everything that had just happened. The men and lady who’d died. The two dragons fighting. The Night King blotting out the sun. It made his problem seem so small. Who cared who his true parents were? Who cared if he no longer knew who he was? All that mattered was the Night King and his army and that they must defeat him.

He’d said so himself, so often. But now he had to put aside his problem to deal with the greater threat. He needed to focus on his enemy. The next northernmost keep was the Dreadfort. Should he divert a fighting force there to prepare them? Should he send word for them to abandon their home and head to Winterfell? What would the queen and all their advisors plan for the next attack?

He should be in Winterfell, with his sisters and Daenerys. He should be planning the next attack with them, not walking towards them. He really was a northern fool.

A loud screech broke Jon out of his thoughts. He looked up to see Rhaegal. The rest of the party flinched at the sound, many throwing themselves to the ground just as he’d done upon first meeting a dragon. Only the men who’d been saved by the dragons beyond the Wall stayed upright.

The dragon flew over them, heading in the direction of Winterfell. Bitterly, Jon thought if he truly were a Targaryen, couldn’t he ride the damn thing back?

The people shuddered at the sight of the great beast. Jon hoped it was due to the fact that they had all been terrorized by an undead one for weeks. Because the green one was the only reason why they lived. He didn’t want to explain that to them right now though. He held out his hands to the boys who’d been beside him and told them the same thing Tyrion had told him, “I’d say you get used to them, but you never really do.”

The boys chuckled and Jon gave them a tight smile. He looked at them, so young. They didn’t deserve a world going to hell. They deserved a life that he’d had at ten, safe in the walls of Winterfell, playing with his brother and the rest. No real cares beyond his bastard label.

The truth didn’t change those memories. It just put them in a different light. He’d only been safe at Winterfell because Ned Stark had lied to his best friend and king. Robb and Arya weren’t really his half-brother and sister, they were his cousins. He hadn’t been a bastard, just a son to a dead man and woman who’d caused a war.

His existence was the result of thousands dead. The thought made Jon uncomfortable. How many more had died since then? Years of war had left the realm destroyed and primed for the Night King’s attack. They were weak. He wondered if that was why the Night King was attacking now. Did he know? How would he? The thoughts kept swirling in Jon’s head and he lost himself in them.
They stopped to camp when Jon noticed the people of Last Hearth nearly collapsing of exhaustion. He hoped they were far enough away. It wasn’t until he sat around the fire with the rest of them that he felt his own exhaustion. The adrenaline had kept him going, but it was gone now, leaving him ready to collapse.

The men talked, which Jon only half listened to. There was no bawdy talk tonight, thankfully. Mostly it was the men of the Night’s Watch telling stories about their lives prior to the Wall. Small farms, the poorest parts of Flea Bottom and how desperate starving men became -- they were familiar to Jon. His time at the Wall had taught him a lot, especially how hard life could really get.

Beric sat next to him, nudging his shoulder. “You look like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders.”

Jon looked to the men, who were ignoring them, instead competing over whose life was toughest. He replied honestly, “How do we beat this evil? How do we even stand against an enemy that can make the sun disappear?”

Beric said with a confidence that didn’t sound false, “The Lord of the Light will look over us and protect us.”

Jon held back a scoff. “How is he going to help us in darkness?”

“Light is needed most in the dark. He will find us.”

Jon thought for a moment. He knew it couldn’t be complete bullshit, as he had been brought back via the Red Woman. And the Night King and the Long Night were all just supposed to be stories too. Maybe it was time to start looking at stories and legends to find the truth of how to win this war. “Are there any stories or legends or anything in your religion about bringing back light to the dark?”

Beric thought for a moment. “I’m not sure. Thoros might have known.”

Jon said nothing, giving the priest who’d died under his command a moment of silence. Jon noticed something at the edge of his vision, two somethings in fact. The Neds. Jon repressed a sigh. He remembered when Bran and Rickon did this, followed him and Robb around when they were all younger.

Jon pushed aside the thought, knowing that his memories of Rickon and Robb wouldn’t help him focus on what needed to happen. He put a hand on Beric’s shoulder as he left to retire to his tent.

He walked over to the boys. “Shouldn’t you two be sleeping? Boys need their rest and we have a long way to go tomorrow.”

The boys exchanged a look, before Lord Umber answered, “We aren’t boys. We are warriors.”

Jon nodded, knowing the truth of the words. He walked to his tent, the boys followed. He turned before going in. “Did you need something?”

The boys exchanged another look. This time the servant said, “We’ve been talking.”

Jon’s eyebrow raised, amused despite himself, “Oh? And what have you been discussing?”

Another look. The lord said, “We want to be your squires.”

Jon’s brain sputtered. “He answered without thinking, “I’m not a knight.”
“You’re a king. A warrior. We want to become like you.”

Jon didn’t know what to say to that. He felt uncomfortable under the looks of awe and admiration. He couldn’t do this. He didn’t deserve it. He was a fraud. A coward. He dismissed them, entering his tent, “Go to bed, both of you.”

Jon prepared for bed, but his mind stayed on the boys. His thoughts eventually drifted back to what Daenerys kept telling him, “I can’t have children.”

Jon fell asleep to the thought of what their son might look like and how he might act.

Sansa wasn’t sure where they were going to get all of the wood and oil they were going to need to battle the long night. Fire itself wouldn’t be a problem, not with two dragons who were hesitant to be too far from their mother, but what it would take to keep Winterfell warm and alight. That was a problem.

As she poured over maps, looking for a source of wood they weren’t already using, the queen walked in. Sansa stood and curtsied. She still wasn’t sure if Jon was right to bend the knee, Sansa had had her fill of power-hungry queens in Cersei, but this queen was proving herself to be a valuable ally. She would give the woman respect for that. Sansa wasn’t so distrusting not to see that the North would be without hope without this small woman.

Daenerys walked in, the dark-skinned woman with a strange name that Sansa could never remember walking behind her. “Lady Stark,” the queen said. “I want to invite you take a walk with me.”

Sansa was thinking of how to properly, politely decline. They didn’t have time to act like highborn ladies, taking walks around gardens, but Daenerys stopped her before she could say anything. “I want to tour Winter Town with you as well as visiting my own troops to make sure that our people are resolved. I want them to see us together, acting as allies. I want them to know that the darkness has not overtaken us just yet.”

They were strong words, Sansa thought. No wonder people followed her. The woman knew how to speak well, how to inspire with her speeches. Better than Jon, Sansa had to admit. But then Jon had his own talents. He inspired through actions, not words. He led his men into battle by being on the front lines, like Robb had. He showed bravery and resolve against even horrible odds. She agreed to the walk but had to fetch her furs first. They would meet in the courtyard.

Sansa dressed herself in grey wolf pelts, a cloak she’d fashioned herself. She loved it. She felt like a true Stark in it. Sansa had spent her youth resenting the need for heavy clothes living in the North, longing for the lighter fashions in the south. Now she only wished to be in furs, to surround herself in heavy fabrics that helped her feel shielded against the harsh world.

She walked with pride to the courtyard. The Targaryen was dressed in her house colors as well. The sleek black fur cloak made her three headed dragon pin and her silver hair stand out. Both women silently admired the other before they began to walk side-by-side.

Guards trailed them. The woman who’d accompanied the queen earlier walked with them as well, though she followed her queen’s steps. She held a lantern for them. Sansa wished she could remember the young woman’s name.
Queen Daenerys said, “Tell me about Winterfell.”

Sansa eyed the queen suspiciously. “I suspect Jon already told you plenty about Winterfell.”

“He did.” Sansa had hoped to glean something about what happened between the queen and her brother, but Daenerys’ tone gave nothing away. “But that was his perspective. I want yours.”

Sansa nodded. Where to begin? How did she even begin to explain her home, her sanctuary, her prison, her torture chamber? She wouldn’t tell this strange queen about how one minute she could look at a location and see a happy memory then look again and be reminded of her time with Ramsay Snow. Her pain was too personal, and her joy was too distant. She answered academically, explaining the keep’s history and traditions, what made it special from others in Westeros.

Daenerys nodded along, but seemed to only listen politely, not attentively. Sansa suspected Daenerys had heard all of this before, if not from Jon, then Tyrion. Still both women were dutiful, explaining and listening in turns.

When she finished, Sansa turned to the issues that seemed to consume her these days. “When is the Lannister army supposed to arrive?” Daenerys’ had been here for weeks now, but the Lannisters had yet to even cross the Neck as far as Sansa knew. Though she suspected the army would never arrive, or if it did, it would only be to start a two front war.

“I believe they must be running behind, but they should arrive any day now.” Sansa looked at the queen, wishing she knew if the woman had any tells if when she lied. Sansa didn’t know if the queen was speaking diplomatically to hide her own doubts or if she truly believed what she said.

Jon might have known. He’d spent months with this queen. Sansa cursed him again for just leaving. This would have been easier with him here.

Sansa replied, diplomatically, “Winter makes travel hard.”

“True,” Daenerys agreed.

The advisor spoke up as they approached Winter Town. “What are those men doing?” She was looking at the northmen who were putting sand over the paths they’d carved out of snow. They had torches in the snow behind them to help them see what they were doing.

“It’ll help keep the roads passable.”

Both of the other women nodded. Sansa noticed the men stopped working at the sight of the Dragon Queen, gobsmacked. Sansa couldn’t truly blame them, Daenerys was stunning. She remembered being taken aback the first time she’d seen the queen’s beauty. Littlefinger had been right about at least that much. Sansa still wondered if he’d been right about Jon’s delay and his desire to marry the woman as well.

When she’d asked Jon about that night he came home, he’d deflected. “There’s no time for that now, Sansa. All that matters is the war ahead of us.”

Still Sansa had pressed, learning the fate of the Tarlys made her wonder about her brother’s state of mind, pledging allegiance to another fire-happy Targaryen. “You heard her. She burned men alive, Jon.”

“She executed men who fought against her. Bannermen who betrayed their lieges and refused to kneel to the queen that defeated them. You were the one who wanted me to punish the Karstarks and the Umbers. I would think you’d understand.”
She hadn’t been able to argue his logic, but from his tone, Sansa doubted Jon’s passionate defense of the queen he’d chosen for them was entirely based on logic. What she didn’t know was why. How had the queen so convinced him of her cause? Had she seduced him as some of the lords believed?

Back in the present, both men bowed, saying, “Lady Sansa, your…your grace.” Their eyes kept flickering up to the both women, together.

Sansa realized the Dragon Queen had been right. It would be wise to walk together, show the commoners and lords alike that they were together in this, allies. They continued walking and Daenerys asked about Winter Town and how they were supplying and feeding the northern armies.

“I don’t want to bore you with details, your grace.”

Daenerys frowned, “We are allies, Lady Stark. I do not expect you to shoulder the burden of supply our armies alone. But I cannot help beyond my understanding. So I mean to understand everything.”

Sansa nodded and gave the queen a tour of the setup of Winter Town. The houses that had been turned into barracks, and explained that the North spent most of the summer preparing for winter. Their store houses were mostly full at the moment. But that would only last so long, with the amount of people they had to feed. Plus, the previous fighting took its toll. Ramsay hadn’t stored much of anything during his reign, more concerned with skinning people alive.

The queen picked up on Sansa’s harsh tone towards the sadistic bastard. “Ramsay, your former husband?”

Sansa hated to nod to that. Hated that she had ever been connected to that monster. “Yes,” her voice was tight.

“I’ve heard how terrible he was. Men like him should never be given such power. They hurt so many.”

Sansa bowed her head. It was a nice thing to say, but even a queen couldn’t stop such things; it was the way of the world. Something to be suffered through. “Should we move on to your camps?”

Daenerys nodded. The queen bit her cheek as they walked, then she said, “My Dothraki are not Westerosi. Their customs differ. You may see things not fit for a high-born lady to see. They do not believe in keeping their fighting and lovemaking private.”

Sansa didn’t like it but nodded.

Daenerys continued, “The custom is to make love under the stars. They believe anything worthwhile should be done under the sky.”

“Sounds no worse than our bedding ceremony.”

“Bedding ceremony?”

“Westerosi custom. Carry the bride and groom to the bed, strip them down and toss them in the bed.”

Daenerys looked horrified. “That will not be happening at my wedding.”

And when will that wedding be? Sansa wanted to ask, but she wouldn’t let Littlefinger’s poison
continue to affect her. Instead she focused on another question she had for the queen. “The Dothraki don’t speak any of the common tongue?”

“They understand bits and pieces.” The queen looked to her advisor. “We plan to teach them common commands, forward, stop, and so on.”

“You were married to one once weren’t you? Did your husband learn the common tongue?”

Daenerys ducked her head. “I was teaching him. He learned a little during our marriage, a few key phrases.”

“Like what?”

Daenerys looked off into the distance, no longer present in Winterfell. “A crown for a king.”

Strange thing to learn, Sansa thought. “That’s an odd phrase to learn.”

Daenerys said nothing in response. Sansa recognized the far-off, haunted look. It was one that was often in her own eyes. Whenever she got lost in horrible memories. She decided to ask about the queen’s other army. The one they would visit first.

Sansa tried to think of a better way of asking, but wound up just blurting it out. “Is it true the Unsullied are baby killers?”

The queen and her advisor shared another look. The queen answered, “Yes, they were ordered to do so. It was a horrible practice.”

“But they all did it?”

“Yes.”

“So they would be willing to do it again.”

Daenerys stopped walking. “Do you really think I would order such a thing?”

“Cersei did.” Sansa’s ice blue eyes met Daenerys’ fiery violet ones, neither woman backing down.

“I am not Cersei Lannister. Nor am I Robert Baratheon. I will not be ordering babes killed in their cribs.”

So she said now, Sansa thought. She wondered if the queen’s ideals would last when tested by the corruption in King’s Landing. She continued to walk again, the queen beside her. The toured the Unsullied encampment. All of the men, Sansa noticed, held a reverent respect for their queen. They kept saying a word at the sight of their queen, one Sansa didn’t recognize.

“What does that word mean, mhysa?”

The advisor answered, “Mother. It means mother.”

“Why do they call you that? Aren’t you their queen?”

The queen looked pained, “A mother is better than a queen. A mother is loved and loves back.”

Sansa didn’t understand. She thought of Queen Cersei and how she compared love to a sickness. Did this queen have the same problem as King Robert? A need to be loved? “Fear is a better way to rule,” Sansa said.
The queen stopped walking. She turned to Sansa. “Fear alone is not a good way to rule. You need love to temper it.”

“Fear works for Cersei,” Sansa said.

“For now. But fear only works if you are thing the people fear most. Tell me, Lady Stark, if the dead invaded King’s Landing, do you think the people would still fear Cersei most?”

It was a good point. Sansa looked around the soldiers’ camp. It was unlike most camps she’d been in. There were no men hanging about, goofing off. Most of the men were at assigned posts, even the ones relaxing looked ready to fight at a moment’s notice.

It was odd to Sansa. They moved along to the Dothraki camp.

This camp was even stranger. Despite the queen’s earlier warning, Sansa flinched at the sight of public sex. It brought back painful memories for her.

“Lady Stark,” the queen asked, placing a hand on Sansa’s arm.

Sansa shook her off violently. She saw hurt flash in Daenerys’ eyes, but the other woman pulled into herself, folding her hands together.

“I’m sorry,” Sansa apologized. She could feel the tears threatening. When would this feeling go away? The fear? “Do you have any idea what it’s like to be sold off to a man who rapes you?”

“Yes.” Sansa was taken aback by the blunt answer. She glanced to the woman behind them, who only showed sympathy for her queen. “I believe my brother’s exact words when he sold me were ‘I would let all 40,000 men and their horses rape you if it got me my army.’ I had only him in the world to trust, and he betrayed me.” Sansa was surprised to hear that. As bad as Littlefinger had been, as badly as she had mistrusted him, he wasn’t her brother.

The queen looked at her army, her eyes focused on one of the children playing in the snow. “I want to build a world that protects the vulnerable because I used to be one of them. I don’t want to see the injustices we suffered repeated.”

Sansa finally understood her half-brother’s devotion to this queen. This was a woman who had walked through fire, much like herself, and came out stronger. They continued to tour the camp.

After awhile, Daenerys asked, “Have you ever enjoyed bedsport, Lady Stark?”

Sansa thought she misheard the queen, but when she turned to look, she saw from the queen’s mischievous smirk, that no she hadn’t. Sansa struggled not to stutter. “No, your grace,” Sansa wondered if this brazen woman was closer to the queen’s real personality or if it was just her adjustment as a khaleeni...whatever the horse lords called her.

“You should, at least once, especially with the world ending. Podrick Payne may suit your purposes, if his reputation is true. You should send for him.”

Sansa blushed, feeling like a girl she hadn’t been in a long time, gossiping with friends. “I can’t do that. It’s not proper.”

Daenerys rolled her eyes. “Of course you can. Who would stop you? Jon? He’ll huff and lecture about honor, but if you cry and tell him that the squire makes you happy, do you really think Jon will actually take that away from you? It’s the end of the world. Propriety is put aside at such times, take what pleasure you can from it, Lady Stark.”
Sansa was shocked to hear it, but the queen moved along as if she had suggested Sansa take an extra stroll outside. Was it a queen thing? Sansa remembered when Cersei Lannister had given her brazen sex advice as well when she was a girl.

She looked at the Dragon Queen again. If Jon was planning to marry her, Sansa hoped he knew that he wouldn’t be getting a sweet, docile woman. He’d be marrying a dragon.

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Daenerys wasn’t happy to have been proven right. It took almost no time for the northern lords to resume their bitching. Torches had been distributed and lit throughout the camps, and a plan established to keep them lit. They were trying to plan their next battle attack, but the northern lords wanted to wait for their king. A king Bran had told them would take weeks to get back to Winterfell. Still, the lords wanted to wait. Despite the fact they had no time to do so.

It was getting to the point where Daenerys was tempted to go out on Drogon and fetch Jon herself.

Rhaegal had returned a few days after the sun disappeared. Daenerys had met her child outside the gates of Winterfell, his cries calling to her. She knew her child’s noise scared everyone else, but she was saddened by it. She comforted him as any mother would, petting his snout and muttering Valyrian words at him. A deep exhale of warm air that would have burned anyone else helped her remember warmth. She’d feared since coming north that a coldness that seeped into her bones, never to leave her.

She wished she could ask her child about Jon but her children could not speak back.

Thoughts of Jon brought up complicated feelings for her. Ones she still hadn’t resolved. She’d settled on something between worry and anger. She wanted an explanation more than any of the lords, but not about the sun. She wanted to know why he’d left her. But she also wanted to punish him for hurting her. How dare he make her love him and then leave her to go on a dangerous mission that might have killed him. Anger was the easier emotion. Anger placed him in the wrong, allowed her not to examine how much she care for him. Why she worried so much about him.

Daenerys worried too much. Partly about Jon, but more about how much she missed him and how much she worried for him. This worry worried her. How had he managed to get so thoroughly under her skin? How had he managed to make her feel less alone?

She tried not to think about him too much, or the fact she was admitting, to herself at least, that she loved him. But it was proved to be a fruitless endeavor. So she tried to think of the positives of his not being here. As much as she wished Jon was here to help her, Daenerys needed to prove herself to the North on her own. They had to love her for herself, not hanging off their king’s arm.

She knew she had yet to succeed in this endeavor and was beginning to suspect that she might never win them over.

So Daenerys focused on the war ahead of them and defeating the Night King. She had ordered a raven to be sent to the Dreadfort to retreat, as she knew their armies would never be ready in time to defend it. Not with the northern one refusing to obey her commands and the smiths still forging dragonglass weapons for her own troops.

Still, the meetings with the northern lords continued. And still, they went nowhere.
Daenerys tried to hide her frustration at these meetings. She let her Lord Hand handle most of it, trying to appear attentive and authoritative, but mostly keeping quiet. She almost wished Jon hadn’t destroyed the captured wight for Cersei as she often thought how useful it would be as a reminder of who their real enemy was.

It gave her tremendous insight into Jon’s early frustrations with her.

She interrupted one of the lord’s tirades about how her Dothraki weren’t following Westerosi customs. “This is not important. Defeating the Night King and his army is what’s important. That is what we need to discuss.” Daenerys saw the anger her interruption and dismissal had caused.

One of the northern lords snorted. “What would a woman know of war? We’re digging trenches and training our men and women. It’s all we can do right now.”

Daenerys hated when men spoke to her like that. She had hoped it would lesson as she grew. She had hoped she might receive different treatment in her homeland. But nothing seemed to change. She smiled tightly, “You’re right. I’ve only sacked Slaver’s Bay, what would I know of war?”

Bran spoke, “The army is on the move, heading to the Dreadfort. The Night King is watching over it upon his dragon, so it would be a risk to attack them now. Our king won’t be back for at least another week.”

Sansa agreed with Daenerys. “We need a plan to defeat the Night King. A way to stop him before he and his army get the chance to reach Winterfell.”

“The dragons,” One lord responded. “The dragons are the only way to take down the undead one.”

Daenerys knew there was some truth to that, but whenever she thought of it, all she could see was Viserion, falling again. She would not lose another child. “We need more than that.”

Arguments took over.

Daenerys didn’t participate, she only barely listened, her frustration boiling. Why couldn’t they just listen? Why must everything become a fight? They fought amongst themselves more than the fought the Night King.

Her attention was brought back when one of the northern lords yelled, “I’m not about to follow some mad bitch and her monsters.

The Dothraki still didn’t understand most of the common tongue, but Grey Worm did. He unsheathed his sword at the insult of his queen, which made the rest of her men follow his lead. The northerners responded in kind and the hall fell silent, tenseness taking over.

Daenerys stood. She commanded her men to stand down, which they did, but their hands stayed on their weapons, their eyes watching the northerners carefully. The northerners only backed off at the command of Lady Stark.

“We have to work together,” Daenerys said. “Fighting amongst ourselves cannot happen. We have a greater enemy to defeat. The North…”

A lord interrupted her. “You’re a foreign queen who understands nothing of these lands. You’re a monster who burns men alive, just like your father before you.”

Daenerys lost her hold on her temper. “You’re right. I am a monster. I burn those who stand against me alive. I command armies that have killed thousands on my command. I have crucified masters
to pay back the crucified children they greeted me with. I am a horrifying enemy. Most of the people who stood against me died screaming.”

She had every northerner’s attention. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Tyrion’s concerned look.

“The North is not my enemy. You are my allies, my people. I fight with you. I fight for you. The enemy you face is an army of undead demons, full of terrors even you brave men and women will tremble before. You face a monstrous enemy. Alone, you would face the coming army, you would fight them bravely and honorably, and you would die. I will give your monsters of ice fire and blood and I will destroy them as I destroyed my previous enemies.”

No one said anything.

“Do you know what they call me in Essos? Mhysa. It means Mother. And I am a mother to all of you. You lords and ladies, acting like children, throwing tantrums about your insignificant problems. But like any good mother, I will let you kick and scream against the floor and then drag you to your responsibilities, still kicking and screaming if I must. I will force you to do what best for you, for your own good. Because I love you. I want you all to survive this. I want the North to live. And if you hate me for it, so be it. I am a mother. I am Daenerys Stormborn of the House Targaryen, First of Her Name, the Unburnt, Queen of the Andals and the First Men, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Breaker of Chains, and Mother of Dragons.”

No one spoke for a long time, everyone digesting the queen’s words with serious expressions.

“And if we refuse?” One lord questioned.

Daenerys smirked. “I will do what all mothers do when that happens. You may speak with your father king when he returns home.” Her eyes narrowed. “Most of you lords are fathers, you know what happens next with that trick.”

One of the lords laughed at that, surprisingly. A few more chuckles followed. But an angry voice called out. “He’ll agree with you because you seduced him.”

An awkward silence filled the room. Daenerys’ voice carried, “Your king was a Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. If I had ever tried to seduce him, I would’ve failed.” Daenerys looked to Tyrion to finish the meeting.

He understood perfectly, standing. “We’ve been talking in circles long enough for today. We’ll take a break. Thank you, my lords and ladies.”

Daenerys sat again, as the rest of the room slowly cleared out. Her fingers tapped on the table, betraying her irritable mood. She waited to speak when it was just her and Tyrion.

He approached her carefully, like one did with a wild beast. Was her temper really so terrifying? He gave her a moment of study, before he nodded slightly. He went over to pour them both a full glass of wine. He set hers in front of her and asked, “Have you noticed that Bran Stark still refers to Jon Snow as king?”

“What?” Daenerys hadn’t expected that question. Nor had she noticed.

“All the Starks know that Jon has bent the knee, yet the one who probably knew it before even I did, our all-seeing, all-knowing eye, still calls him king. I find it curious.” Tyrion lifted his wine goblet.
“Perhaps it’s because he is all-seeing. He might know our intentions with him.”

“Oh? Pray tell, what our intentions with him?”

“An alliance. Once we win this war and I take back my kingdoms, I think a celebration would be good for us all. A wedding celebration after my coronation.”

“Are you planning on marrying him?”

“You wanted me to, remember?”

Daenerys watched Tyrion swallow. “A bastard is not a worthy consort to a queen.”

“A king is.”

“He’s no longer a king.”

“He hasn’t publicly announced it to his lords.”

“Because he went missing.” Daenerys had to swallow her angry response to that. Tyrion continued, “Has he asked you to marry him? Why would he? It was supposed to be political. A negotiation. Instead, you gave him everything he wanted and he bent the knee. You should save your marriage for the next necessary ally.”

“We still need the North when this war is over,” Daenerys’ voice had hardened. She feared it might break if she didn’t. “It would make our alliance permanent.”

“What about Dorne? Or the Iron Islands? The Westerlands? You even have enemies in the Crownlands, your grace. The North is important, but the Starks are not the only family you need.”

“But they are important. You told me that yourself. They are the most honored and respected family in Westeros.”

“They lost the last war they fought. They’ve taken a beating lately, even with their honor and respect. And if you fight beside them and save the North, you will probably win their loyalty. But what of the next family who rules Dorne? You’d allied with the Sand Snakes, what if the faction that wins out hates the sisters? You’ve already picked your replacement for the Tyrells, but what if the bannermen of the Reach don’t bow to the Tarly? What if there is rebellion and war in the future? What if you need it quelled? What if…”

Daenerys interrupted, “What if, you could go on for days with these scenarios. We still have to beat the Night King. That is our focus now. That is where I want your mind to be.”

Tyrion looked as if he’d swallowed something sour. He persisted, “Politics and ruling, they are all about the long game, your grace. You must consider the effect your actions today will have ten years from now.”

“I know that and I thank you for your wise counsel, but…” Daenerys stopped. “But this enemy, I’ve never faced the like.”

“No one has. Not for a thousand years at least.” He nodded once. “I will focus my attention on the war. We must defeat the Night King and his army to even have a chance to build a better world. But I ask you not to let your emotions make decisions that you won’t be able to take back.”

Like bedding Jon, Daenerys knew was the unspoken complaint. It always boiled down to that. And
she had thought Jorah would take it the worst. He’d barely acknowledged it. Tyrion was the one always harping her on it.

“The Night King blotted out the sun, Tyrion. I don’t know how to bring it back. I know how to command armies, I know how to inspire people, and I know how to use dragons. But I don’t know how to make the fucking sun rise.”

Tyrion’s head cocked. “I’ve never heard you swear before.”

Daenerys shook her head. “It’s not queenly.” She sighed, “We need the sun. Not just for morale. We can still grow crops in the south. And there’s only so much wood to burn for torches.”

“Essos should help with the food,” Tyrion said, lifting his goblet once more.

“As long as the Long Night hasn’t reached there as well.”

“Let’s pray it hasn’t.”

Daenerys hadn’t prayed in a long time. Viserys held no love for anyone but himself, so she hadn’t grown up faithful. She was more familiar with the religions of Essos than Westeros, but she held most of her faith in herself. She had to hold onto such belief for so long that it was nearly second nature to her now. She thought of life she might have had, if she’d been raised in her home country. She saw Tyrion watching her carefully, so she said to him, “Our fathers ruled the Seven Kingdoms together for 20 years. Twenty years of peace and prosperity before my father’s madness destroyed him and my family’s rule. It took the Usurper less time than that to bankrupt the country and for his death to plunge it back into war. Think what might have been.”

“You wouldn’t be queen. You would have been fifth in line for the throne after your father. There would be no dragons. It might have turned out worse.” Tyrion pointed out.

Daenerys had another thought, but hesitated to say it. She could tell it made Tyrion nervous. Finally she asked, “Tyrion, do you the secret to making wildfire?”

Tyrion put down his wine. “No, only the alchemist’s guild in King’s Landing know that secret.”

“We may need it before this fight is over.” She stopped his argument before he can make it. “I know, mad king’s daughter, but we may need it before this is over. Wildfire burns even hotter than dragonfire. It never goes out and melts stone and even dragonscale. I know how it will look. I know it’s a risk, politically. But I fight with Fire and Blood, and we’ll need both to win this. I don’t want the people to hate me, but I can take it if it means they live. We must win this war. My people must survive the Long Night. Whatever it takes.”

She looked out the window to the dark spot where the sun should be.

Tyrion wished he could disagree with his queen, but she would prove right he feared. He nodded. “It would be too dangerous to transport wildfire. One bump on the road and…” Tyrion’s hands imitated an explosion. “It would be easier to kidnap an alchemist.”

Daenerys nodded. “Whatever it takes,” she said sadly. “I’m supposed to be a better kind of leader, but sometimes I fear…” Daenerys paused. “I fear I’m making too many compromises. It was my mistake in Meereen. I cannot afford to make the same blunder in Westeros.”

“The fact that you worry about such things shows you’re a better leader than most of the leaders Westeros has seen in the past decade or so. Our fathers included.”
Daenerys smiled softly, encouraged by his words. She had one more thought to share with her Hand, “I have an idea for you, Lord Tyrion.”

Why did Winterfell’s library have to be at the top of a damn tower? Tyrion hated climbing stairs. Unlike most lords, Tyrion hadn’t spent his life practicing fighting, and since his self-induced celibacy, he got almost nothing resembling physical exercise. He wasn’t naturally built for it and being out of shape wasn’t helping him.

He’d created a monster with his queen. She was too clever. Some days he almost longed for the days of advising Joffrey again. The boy had been a vicious idiot who never outsmarted him, never out argued him. Tyrion only ever underestimated how cruel and stupid his nephew could be. Their argument that led him to climbing these stairs was a perfect example of his queen’s too smart for his good tendencies.

“I want you to assist Lord Tarly in searching through the books of Winterfell and the ones he stole from the Citadel. I want you the two of you to find any information that may be useful in this fight.”

“I’m not suited for such a task,” Tyrion tried to dismiss it. The fat lord had been researching for weeks now to no avail. Tyrion had no desire to join in.

“You’ve admitted to be no use on a battlefield. You also claim to love reading and gain knowledge. This is a perfect assignment for you.”

“You need my council.”

“And I will send for you when those times arise. It will go faster with two.” Daenerys lowered her voice. “I killed his family. Do you think I should trust him to do it alone?”

“You argue too well.”

“I learned from the best.”

Flattery too, he remembered now. Tyrion had truly created a monster.

When he reached the top stair, he took a moment to catch his breath. He should have brought a wine sack with. He was already longing for a drink, but he’d be damned if he was going to go down the stairs again to fetch one just to climb back up again. Tyrion opened the door instead.

Lord Tarly sat behind stacks of books, old and dusty ones. He looked confused for a moment by the opened door, until he thought to look down. His eyes widened and the young lord stood. “My Lord,” Sam said.

It was a reaction Tyrion was sadly used to. He walked in, going on the other side of the table. He looked at the books, closely. “So these are the great books of the Citadel? I have always wished to see it. I imagine it is much like nirvana for a book lover.”

“Yes,” Sam agreed. “It is truly an amazing sight to behold. All of the knowledge in the Seven Kingdoms collected in one place.”
Tyrion nodded. “In another life I might have become a maester, gotten my chain. Part of me always wanted to.” He touched the old leather of one of the stolen books. “But I could never quite get past the no women thing. Why would a man willingly give up such a thing?”

Lord Tarly’s head ducked. Tyrion knew the young man practically had a wife and child despite being a man of the Night’s Watch and his training to be a maester. He had not learned how the young lord had managed to so thoroughly duck some of his vows, aside from being friends with the former Lord Commander.

Tyrion sat across from Sam. He explained, “I have been ordered by our queen to assist in finding a solution to our undead problem.” He pointed to the piles of books. “So explain your system.”

Sam told him that the books on his right were the ones he still needed to read and the ones to his left were ones he’d already searched through. He gave Tyrion a quill and paper and handed him a book from his to read pile. He said with a slight smile, “It’ll be nice to have some help. I’ve heard a lot of good things about you, Lord Lannister.”

Tyrion doubted that. He put the book back, taking a book from the read pile instead. Sam’s brow furrowed and he opened his mouth, but Tyrion said, “Fresh eyes might see something you missed.”

Sam closed his mouth, but Tyrion could tell he’d mildly offended the lord. But he said nothing. Interesting, Tyrion thought. A firstborn son of a lord, yet he didn’t have the guts to verbally smack down a dwarf. Or perhaps it was too much kindness that Tarly suffered from.

The men read and took their notes in relative silence. It was unusual for Tyrion. He was used to exchanging funny stories when with other men, reading usually being a solitary activity for him. The closest he’d gotten to doing something like this was when Bronn watched him read while he drank Tyrion’s good wine and make sarcastic quips.

Tyrion missed his old friend. He wondered when the sellsword and his brother would be arriving with their army. There had been no messages by raven and the Stark lad said little about the Lannister army beside the fact that they were delayed.

Tyrion and the Tarly lord developed a routine quickly enough. It was odd for Tyrion to be treated with respect, but Sam Tarly did. It made Tyrion wonder. One day, taking a break from reading, and remembering his wine now, Tyrion leaned back in his chair, studying the young man he’d been spending so much time with. “Tell me, Lord Tarly, I’ve heard you are friends with Jon Snow. How did that happen?”

“We met in the Night’s Watch. I was having a hard time, never was much of a fighter.” Sam looked down. “Jon helped me. He was my first real friend.” His voice lowered, “My only friend.”

Tyrion felt his heart go out to the other man. He understood only too well how precious real friends were to men who had none. “Jon Snow is a good man.”

“Aye,” Sam agreed.

“Our queen agrees as well. She’s quite fond of the King in the North.”

Sam shook his head. “I know.”

Tyrion’s eyebrow rose, “Do you?” What did Samwell Tarly know about that? Had he learned something from Jon Snow?

“I mean, Jon’s always brought that out in people. Everyone loves him.”
“Except the people that hate him,” Tyrion had been spending enough time with disagreeable northern lords to know that Jon Snow wasn’t quite beloved by all. He was just loved and respected enough, and possessed the right bloodline to rule.

“They don’t know the real him. They don’t know the truth. Jon was born to rule.”

“What do you mean?” Bastards weren’t born to do much of anything.

“I just mean…” Tarly swallowed. “He’s king. That can’t be an accident. Him and the queen too, it’s all fated, I think. Jon becoming a king against all the odds...the last Targaryens...the dragons returning when we need them most...it’s all connected.”

It was a flub. Not one that most men would pick up on, but Tyrion Lannister was not most men. His eyes narrowed, “Targaryens? You know something.” He watched Sam Tarly’s eyes widen before he could control his features. “Something about...Jon Snow...and the queen. Something you’re not saying.”

Tarly laughed nervously. “I don’t know anything.”

“Bullshit,” Tyrion said. Did he know why Jon Snow had left? Had he spoken to him beforehand? Did he know about the relationship between Jon and Daenerys? Had Jon told him he planned to marry to Daenerys and become a Targaryen? What did Tarly know? It must be good to get him so nervous so quickly.

Lord Tarly stood suddenly. “I just remembered, Gilly needed...something for the...for little Sam. I have to go. I’ll see you tomorrow, Lord Lannister.” The man nearly ran out of the room.

“Good day, Lord Tarly,” Tyrion called after him. He sipped from his wine sack. This boring task in the library just got far more interesting. He went back to his reading.

Lord Umber and the servant boy made Jon feel like he was surrounded by Neds, as neither boy let him leave their sight. It was like gaining two smaller shadows. Despite him telling them he was no knight, they proceeded to act like his squires, caring for his horse and carrying his equipment. He wanted to tell them off, but every time he tried, they looked up at him with admiration that reminded him so much of Rickon, and he found he didn’t have the strength to break either boy’s heart.

The whole situation amused Edd and Tormund, which only annoyed Jon more.

The most useful thing the boys did was look for branches to use for torches. The marching was hard since it was impossible to know how much time passed without the sun and stars to mark time or direction. The dark made everything blend together. It was exhausting.

They had reached a good resting spot, one Jon vaguely remembered from the journey to Last Hearth. He was struggling to remember just how far it was from Winterfell.

He both longed for and dreaded his return to his home. The memories and truth that drove him away still lingered there. Jon tried to keep his thoughts in the same perspective as when he faced the Night King. That the truth didn’t matter.
But it did matter. It mattered that he wasn’t the Bastard of Winterfell but the Heir to the Iron Throne. It mattered that Daenerys Targaryen, the woman he loved, was also his aunt. It mattered that his entire life had been built on a lie.

It mattered. Maybe not as much as the undead army and the Battle for the Dawn, but it still meant something to him and to the Seven Kingdoms.

He kept trying to dismiss it, kept trying to pretend it didn’t matter. He was still Ned Stark’s bastard, would always see that man as his father. He was even beginning to convince himself that he didn’t need to tell anyone the truth. There was nothing to know. Bran’s words meant nothing.

But they did. The secret was known now, it wouldn’t stay hidden. He had to deal with it. Jon just didn’t want to deal with it. He wanted to pretend nothing had changed, and the longer he stayed away, the easier it was to dismiss everything he’d learned.

Perhaps he should run away permanently? Go beyond the wall again and try to look for some ancient secret to defeat the Night King, hidden where the army had been. Wouldn’t that be where such a thing would be?

Foolishness, his mind dismissed. Don’t be a coward.

Jon tried to focus on the good, on returning to his family and his love, but that didn’t comfort him either. He knew none of the women would be pleased with his actions. He also knew he had a long, difficult conversation ahead with all of them.

Daenerys, he thought. Memories of her from their trip up here warmed him. She was so beautiful. Fierce and lovely. He still longed for her. He would want her even if she hated him. He would want her until he died.

Tormund plopped down next to him, pulling Jon from his thoughts. He was grateful for the distraction. He nodded at the two boys staring at Jon. “You want me to scare them off for you?”

Jon smiled. He had no doubt the wildling could frighten the boys. His gaze followed and the boys immediately scattered, trying to look busy when he looked at them. “Nah, they’re harmless.”

Tormund’s voice lowered, rougher than usual, “You got a plan beyond walking, right?”

Jon didn’t, really. “We need to get back to Winterfell and take stock. Armies, weapons, supplies and training.” All the things he should have been supervising instead of running off, Jon thought bitterly. “We’ll prepare a defense around Winterfell.”

“That smart?” Tormund asked. “Puttin’ everyone in one place, giving that undead bastard one target.”

He was right, Jon knew. “We can’t break up too much or we won’t have the numbers to beat him back.” But perhaps he could send women and children down to White Harbor or the Neck or even to the Riverlands. “Daenerys has good advisers. She’ll have something prepared and planned when we get there.”

“Daenerys,” Tormund butchered the Valyrian name. “That Dragon Queen who loves you?”

Jon hoped nobody heard that. “Why do you say that?”

“She came for you on her dragon when you asked,” Tormund replied as though Jon was an idiot.
“She saved us all,” Jon tried to deflect.

“She reached out to you. When she thought you dead, she nearly broke waiting for you. We all saw it. I told her you always come back.”

Jon didn’t know any of that. He couldn’t imagine Daenerys standing around waiting for anyone.

Tormund continued, nodding. “I think that queen would have stayed atop the Wall until her dead dragon brought it down waiting for you if her bear knight didn’t force her to leave.”

Jon thought of seeing her beside him when he first woke up. Davos had told him that the queen rarely left his side as he slept. But he hadn’t believed the old smuggler since she avoided him once she ran out on him. Now he wondered.

“She’s a strange one. She don’t act like a kneeler,” Tormund observed.

“That’s because she’s the one we kneel to,” Jon said.

“I bet you do,” Tormund grinned. “How slick does she get when you kneel for her?”

Jon smacked Tormund. “You can’t speak about a queen like that.”

Tormund’s grin didn’t move. “But you do know, don’t you?”

Jon rolled his eyes and ignored him. He could lie easily enough to men who didn’t know him, but he knew Tormund would see through any bullshit he tried.

“Seems a fitting woman for you, being that she’s been kissed by ice. Never seen that color of hair before.”

Jon smiles. “Daenerys is a Targaryen. The last one. Fire made flesh.” Jon ignored his own Targaryen lineage. It wasn’t important.

Tormund nodded, “Fire and ice. Matches you very well then.”

“What do you mean?”

“You call yourself a northman, but there’s always been a fire to you. She’s the same, pretty, icy exterior, fiery inside.”

Fiery, like Ygritte. “She reminds me of Ygritte.”

“She’s nothing like Ygritte. They both liked your pretty face that makes you think they are the same. The only thing they had in common is they’ve both sucked your tiny cock.”

“That’s not true,” Jon said. And it wasn’t a lie. Ygritte had never done that, just Daenerys.

Tormund rolled his eyes. “Still pretending to be a virtuous crow? You southerners,” Tormund snorted. “Make everything complicated. She’s a beauty who wanted to fuck you. Nothing complicated about that.”

Jon often wished that his people could learn some things from the Free Folk. He longed to have the freedom they did. His eyes closed. “It’s always complicated when thrones are involved.”

Tormund blew a raspberry. “Kneeling.”
Jon lowered his voice, not wanting to the northerners to hear, “Kneeling got me dragons and armies, Tormund. It gave us a chance of winning.”

Tormund looked up to the darkened sky. “Never had much of a chance.”

Jon looked up to the sky as well. “No, but we’ll fight anyway.”

They had to.

Sansa had been avoiding the courtyard and its training. Arya was more useful there, and despite Jon’s orders that all men and women would receive training, Sansa wasn’t comfortable with a sword in her hands.

But today, she watched over the training. It had to be done by torchlight now, but for the most part, the fighters didn’t seem to despair. That encouraged Sansa. Northerners were tough, not much would keep them down for long.

Sansa wished Jon would return again. The queen was doing pretty well in keeping the men together and focused, but it seemed they’d all reached a stalemate. The lords and ladies didn’t want to proceed without their king’s input, and honestly, Sansa wanted Jon’s take on what had happened and what they should do next as well.

She also wondered when Jon planned to tell everyone that he’d bent the knee to this queen. He would have to before the Lannisters arrived since they knew and the northerners shouldn’t learn from their former enemy that their king had pledge them to the Targaryen queen.

Spending time with the Dragon Queen had convinced Sansa that Jon hadn’t completely lost his mind in bowing to this foreign invader. Daenerys didn’t have Joffrey’s cruelty or Cersei’s indifference. She cared about her people and strove to do the right thing.

Sansa just couldn’t bring herself to trust the other woman. She’d learned too much in the foolishness of trusting outside her pack. Starks, and Starks alone, could be trusted.

Even they were failing her, Sansa thought sadly. Jon was never here, Arya’s new skills and deadly attitude scared her, and Bran, Bran was so different now he still seemed to be gone.

Sansa spotted a familiar face in the courtyard. Her breath caught in fear. What was he doing here? How long had he been at Winterfell?

The man turned his scarred face to where she stood. Sansa gathered her courage, deciding it would be pointless to run away. She was no longer the scared little girl the Hound had once known.

As she walked up to him, the Hound smirked and greeted her, “Little bird.”

Sansa didn’t know if she hated or liked the nickname. “Hound,” she said in response, her voice steel. “Are you fighting for the King in the North now?”

He scoffed, “I ain’t fighting for anyone anymore. I’m just here for all those dead cunts. Ain’t no use running from this fight.”

Sansa nodded, understanding. “You were at the Dragon Pit?”
“Yeah,” he confirmed. “You weren’t.”

Sansa wouldn’t risk it. She would never go south again. “No, but my king was.”

“Your king,” the Hound lingered on the words. “Your king who bent the knee to the Dragon Queen.” Sansa opened her mouth, but Clegor stopped her. “Don’t bother denying it, girly. He told everyone at that meeting.”

Sansa didn’t know that. She was so mad at Jon. Why did he do that? Why did he always have to do the noble thing? Did he learn nothing from what happened to their father? To Robb?

“I get it,” Clegor said, surprising Sansa. “The queen saved us beyond the Wall. She could’ve left us for dead. Probably should have. But she came, she saved us, sacrificed one of her dragons to do so. Hard not to align yourself with someone like that.”

Sansa nodded, needing the reminder. That was right. If not for Daenerys Targaryen, her brother Jon would be dead. She owed the woman for that at least.

The Hound looked around. “Shouldn’t you have guards or something, Little Bird?”

“I’m in Winterfell, my home. I am safe.” But then she hadn’t been safe here when Ramsay had been in charge.

The Hound scoffed. “That don’t matter. You should keep a personal guard for safety.”

Sansa knew the former kingsguard was right. She would speak with Brienne of Tarth. She said as much. Though remembering the Dragon Queen’s words made Sansa blush at the thought of coming across Podrick Payne.

“I’ll guard you until then.” Sansa opened her mouth to protest, but the Hound stopped her. “Don’t argue with me, little bird.”

Sansa closed her mouth again.

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Jon knew they were approaching Winterfell again. It had been a slow journey back and he feared what bad news might await him in Winterfell’s gates. Not to mention all that he’d been running from. Even now part of him wanted to stay away and let the refugees find Winterfell on their own. Edd, Tormund and Beric could escort them the rest of the way.

But he couldn’t do that. These were his people, he had to be there for them. He had a duty and he’d run from it too long.

He was so weary of duty and fighting. He just wanted to take a break from it all, perhaps take some time to think over the information Bran had given him. Reflect on his life and what his father, Ned, had done.

But he knew that was impossible. The sun no longer shined, the Long Night was here. He needed to stay and fight to bring back the dawn. He moved forward.

To his surprise, it wasn’t Sansa, Arya and Daenerys waiting for him at the gates. Instead it was his Hand beside Daenerys’, Ser Davos and Lord Tyrion.
Davos looked pissed. Jon ducked his head. He wondered who’d gotten to tell Davos he just left. Tyrion’s look was much more calculating.

Jon decided to ignore the obvious and pretended he’d only been out for a few hours rather than weeks. “We have nearly 500 men, women and children we need to settle here. Where do we have the most room?”

Tyrion responded, “There’s not much room left anywhere, but I assume they’ll want to be settled in Winter Town with the rest of the Northerners.”

Jon nodded. He saw the group of wildlings that had taken shelter at the Last Hearth. An idea sparked, “Tormund, your people may find more comfort with the Dothraki.”

Everyone seemed surprised by this, but Jon knew that it may work better. The Free Folk still weren’t completely accepted by the northerners or vice versa. Too many years of raids and bad blood between them. But the Dothraki? Whenever Jon spent time with Dany’s warriors, he was reminded of his time with the Free Folk. He thought the two cultures would blend nicely. Though there was the problem of not having a common language...

“Doth...what?” Tormund’s accent butchered the foreign word even worse than Jon’s.

“The Horse Lords, the Free Folk may find more in common with them than they do the people of the North.” Jon could see Davos considering it while Tyrion looked concerned.

“Horse Lords?” Tormund said. “Bah, horses and lords aren’t what the Free Folk are about. You should know that.”

“Tormund, trust me,” Jon said. “Go into their camp, pick a fight with the biggest one you find and defeat him. The rest will leave you be after that. They respect strength.”

Tormund grinned. “Maybe they won’t be so bad.”

Sansa appeared at that moment, the Hound following her. Jon’s brow furrowed. Did those two know each other? He guessed they had probably met at King’s Landing as the Hound had been a Kingsguard. But why would Sansa let him near her?

She looked exactly like her mother in that moment, her look of cold hatred directed at Jon a perfect match to Catelyn Stark’s. Jon could feel his shoulders hunch the same way they did when he was a boy trying to escape the mean gaze of his stepmother. “You’re back,” she said, no warmth in her voice.

“Aye,” Jon said. Before he could say anything more a movement caught his eye.

Ghost, silent as always, ran to Jon. He ran a hand through his friend’s fur. He was spending too much time away from his direwolf lately. He would have to amend that.

Jon was so caught up in his thoughts and reunion with Ghost he hadn’t noticed her approach.

“Lord Snow,” Daenerys’ sweet voice was dripping with barely laced anger. Still, Jon turned to face her. She looked even more beautiful than his memory of her. She appeared to be glowing in her white furs. Arya stood beside her, eyes narrowed and focused on him, her hand at the hilt of her sword.

Shit. They were going to kill him together. Jon’s eyes darted between the two women. There was no way he could beat them both. And he had been the one who’d given Arya the sword she was
going to use to kill him.

A screech overhead caused Jon to look up, and he saw the outlines of Daenerys’ dragons circling. She really was pissed. Jon could feel the terror he’d once felt at the sight of them return, despite how many times they’d saved him. Tyrion was right. You never really got used to them.

Daenerys stopped a few feet from him. Her eyes were narrowed and Jon repressed his urge to run over and hug her. They were in the courtyard where anyone could see them and she didn’t look in the mood.

She asked, in a tone colder than she’d ever directed at him before yet laced with barely audible worry, “What happened?”

Jon knew there were several meanings behind that question. His eyes darted to Arya, whose fury was even more evident than Daenerys’. He inhaled deeply and told them about what happened at Last Hearth. About the Night King and his mount, Rhaegal showing up and plucking out his former brother’s eye, and how the Night King rose into the air and left the world in darkness.

Daenerys took it all in. She kept her face mostly neutral except when Jon talked about the dragons, clearly the mention of Viserion’s fate and her children fighting broke their mother’s heart. At the end, the queen took a shaky breath in. “Okay, we’ll call a meeting to discuss next moves.” She looked over to Tyrion, who nodded. Her gaze shifted back to Jon and she took a step forward, her voice lowering so it wouldn’t be overheard. “You cannot do that again. You are the commander of our armies. You leaving, without a word, it doesn’t do anything to help morale. You cannot do whatever you like. I am your queen, and our plan did not involve you risking your life.”

She took another step closer, her voice even softer now. Jon had to lean in to hear her. “I understand that you were upset about learning your mother’s identity, but you can’t just leave, Jon.”

Jon's eyes widened and he felt his breath shortened. Who told her? Was it Bran? Sam? No. She could not learn this way. She deserved to hear it from him at least. “Dany…”

She held a hand up, silencing him. “We shall discuss that later. We have more pressing issues.” Daenerys turned to leave, before adding, “Don’t do that again. Running off to be killed will only hurt people who cannot afford to be in pain right now.” Her eyes connected with him. Her violet ones shining with unshed tears. “They may not be able to bare their burdens without you.”

Her voice cracked on the last sentence, and she practically ran from him. Jon wanted to chase after her. Tell her what a fool he was and that he loved her and never wanted to hurt her. Part of him still marveled that Daenerys Targaryen cared for him at all. Her raw pain hurt him more than her anger. He couldn’t believe he’d done that to her. He didn’t think anyone would ever care for him like that, let alone someone like her.

But Tyrion stepped in and brought Jon back from his heartbreak. “She’s still pissed at you, you know, and she’s had time to think. I don’t think a Meereense knot is in your future.”

Jon didn’t know what that was and it clearly showed on his face. Tyrion explained with an annoyed sigh. “It’s a sex act.” Jon still didn’t understand. “I know you’re not a virgin, Snow. I had the room next to Daenerys on that ship and those walls weren’t soundproof.”

Jon blushed, feeling like the boy (and virgin) he’d been when he’d first met Lord Tyrion. His eyes met Arya’s for a moment, and he blushed more. Sisters shouldn’t hear such things.
Tyrion told him, “Piece of advice, bastard. You know that wolves pace when they are angry. Dragons spit fire.” He looked at him. “And they aren’t too picky about the direction. Please, for all of our sakes, be more careful in the future.”

Tyrion left as well, probably to organize the war council meeting as their queen had commanded and plan their next moves.

That left Jon with his furious sisters and his annoyed Hand. Ser Davos spoke first, “I can’t advise you if I don’t know where you are or what you’re thinking.”

“None of us can,” Sansa added.

Jon attempted to answer, but Davos cut him off. “The queen was right. Running off like that in the middle of a war, this war in particular, it’s foolish, dangerous, and only hurts everyone you’re trying to protect. When we don’t know what’s happened to you, it’s hard to reassure people. I expect our enemy to force us to change our plans quickly. You don’t need to help the dead force us on the defensive.”

Jon didn’t feel like a king or warden at the Onion Knight’s words. He felt like a scolded boy and wanted to look down like a wounded puppy. But he hardened his face, forcing himself to act as a man, a king, and a warden. He was back in Winterfell, his home, but he was no longer a boy.

He was a dragon, a dark part of him whispered, but Jon silenced it.

Sansa said, “Ser Davos is right. Bran can answer where you go and whether you live, but he has more important tasks.” Jon wanted to react to that. Wanted to wonder if it was really essential for Bran to throw Jon’s entire existence into question while they warred. But he held his tongue. Sansa stepped forward, voice lowering, “I know what Bran told you probably was unexpected.” She sighed. “I suppose I should have warned you that Bran seems to…well, he seems to shock with his words and his powers now.”

She looked so much like her mother in that moment that Jon nearly stepped back. It was odd too, to hear that soft tone of Lady Stark’s voice directed at him. Still, Bran had told them? “I know it must have been shocking, but your family will always be here for you.”

The words warmed Jon. He had been so wrong to run. He saw that now. “I know…I just…it was so…” Jon never had any ability for words. “Thank you, Sansa.”

“We’ll talk about it later, Jon. We have a war to plan.”

Jon nodded. Right. His identity wasn’t important in the face coming for them. One look around the darkened courtyard could remind him of that.

“Well,” Ser Davos clapped his hands. “Now that we’ve settled that. There’s a lot you need to be caught up on.”

Jon nodded. His eyes drifted to the direction Daenerys had walked. He wondered when he would get the chance to speak with the queen alone. He wondered how she had taken the news. He couldn’t imagine it was easy to hear that he might have a better claim to the throne than her own.

Not that he wanted it, or would ever fight her for it. She was his queen. Nothing could change that.

Sansa and Ser Davos had walked away, they turned and Sansa asked, “Jon, are you coming?”

“A moment,” he said, looking around Winterfell. Home again, he thought, but it was so different,
not just because of the lack of light. This place hadn’t just been a home, it had hidden him away from the greater world.

He still wasn’t sure how he felt about all of that.

Jon turned around, ready to follow his duty now, but found Arya in his path with a wicked smile he wasn’t sure he’d ever seen on his little sister’s face. Though it reminded him of when Arya had played a particularly cruel trick on Sansa.

“Feel like a sword match, your grace?”

Shit, Jon thought.

Arya wondered how much Jon knew about her fighting skills now. She hadn’t said much about what she’d learned in Braavos and she wasn’t sure what Sansa had told Jon. Arya had wanted to tell Jon everything, but the bastard had left too quickly for her to tell him her story.

She’d pay him back today, she thought with a wicked grin. Jon had suggested practice swords, but Arya was no child anymore. They would cross real steel, like real warriors.

Arya had been hearing tales of Jon’s sword fighting prowess. They called him the best swordsman in the North, perhaps in all of Westeros. She intended to separate fact from myth today. Jon had always been talented with a sword, Arya knew, but she’d never seen anything special from him.

Then again, she’d been just a girl when she’d watched Jon spar with Robb and Theon. She hadn’t known much of anything about swordplay other than what she wanted to learn.

Jon stood across from her now. A crowd had gathered around them. Arya had developed her own reputation in these training yards. She took out Needle. Jon eyed the gift he’d given her warily.

“Are you sure about this, Arya? I would hate to hurt you.”

“I’ve learned a bit more since ‘stick them with the pointy end,’ Jon.”

Jon smiled at the joke. He took out his own sword. It was a Valyrian longsword, like their father’s Ice, though Jon’s looked to be a bit more practical. She wondered how it had gotten into Jon’s hands.

She’d missed so much. They had so much to catch up on. They should have spent nights talking about their experiences. She should have cried to Jon about watching their father die and being there when Robb and her mother met their ends at the Red Wedding. She should have confessed how she paid back the Freys and how she’d become a killer. She should have had a chance to learn everything about what had changed Jon from a kind boy on the cusp of manhood to a seasoned warrior king.

By leaving her, Jon had stolen that from her. How dare he, she thought.

Arya let her anger fuel her. How dare Jon leave again so soon after coming back. Who cared who his mother was? He was still her brother Jon, no matter his blood.

They circled each other for a moment. She studied Jon with the detachment of fighting. He was
bigger than her, stronger. Arya was pretty sure she couldn’t handle Jon’s blade one-handed the way he did. It would have been too heavy for her to keep lifted.

But she would have speed on her side and probably surprise. Jon might know what she was now, but hearing about it was one thing. She doubted he truly saw her as a faceless assassin and not his kid sister.

She would use that to her advantage.

Arya lunged forward, putting all of her strength into her reckless blows. She wanted to lull Jon into a false sense of security. Let him think she wasn’t too trained.

He blocked each one with ease, though he looked discomforted by her viciousness. Arya realized another thing, as she began to attack more smartly, Jon would hesitate to attack her. He’d be defending, as he wouldn’t want to hurt a woman, especially his little sister.

It was another weakness.

Arya’s Needle slashed through the air, far quicker than Jon’s blade moved. Though he used the size of his sword against her. He didn’t need to fully block her blows, just stop them before they could fully connect. Her speed was taking away her ability to effectively strike at him.

Arya broke off. This wasn’t working, at least not well enough to defeat Jon. She studied him again, wanting to invite him to attack her. She knew he wouldn’t put his entire strength into it. Perhaps she could dodge him, wear him down. His armor was heavier and so was his weapon.

Jon said, “I’m surprised you haven’t upgraded your sword yet. Figured you would have moved on to something bigger.”

Arya gripped Needle’s hilt tighter. Jon knew the emotional attachment she held for this sword. Why would she ever part with the greatest gift she’d ever been given. “It’s sharp enough to find its targets.”

He nodded. Then he attacked her.

She was surprised by his speed. Most Westerosi soldiers used strength more than speed to win their fights. Jon used a combination of the two. It reminded Arya of fighting with Jaqen.

But Jon was no faceless man. Arya decided to stop playing. She slipped one of his blows and her blade found his sword hand.

Jon pulled back. He looked shocked at his bleeding hand. Served him right, Arya thought. He left me after promising that he wouldn’t.

The fight continued, with neither of them gaining enough to win. Arya wondered if it would end in a stalemate.

Then she spotted an opening in Jon’s defenses and lunged at the opportunity.

The opening had been a trap, as Arya moved to take advantage, Jon swept a leg, forcing Arya onto her back.

The point of Longclaw rested against Arya’s neck. A cheer went up from the gathered crowd. As much as Arya’s pride burned at being bested, she guessed it was probably better for the king to beat his little sister.
She tried not to let the defeat bother her. She smirked, “They say you’re the greatest swordsman in the North. I thought it was a bunch of bollocks. You couldn’t always best Robb when I saw you fight. Figured it was just everyone hyping up their new king. Nice to see it’s not all bullshit.”

“Watch your language, young lady. What would Septa Mordane say?”

Arya smiled, flipping herself up, “Fuck off, Jon.”

Jon laughed and pulled his sister to his side for a hug. For a moment, everything felt right in the world. It was almost like she was a kid again, playing with her favorite brother.

“If it makes you feel better, you might have beaten Robb,” Jon whispered.

“Why do you say that?” Arya pulled away so she could see Jon.

“Robb was stronger than me, but I was faster than him. I know all the tricks you were using against me because they are the same ones I used against him.”

“You were the better swordsman,” Arya felt a stab of guilt at saying that. Robb was no longer around to defend himself.

Jon deflected. “Robb was better with the lance, Theon best with a bow. We all have our skills.”

Arya wondered how good Robb would be now if it had gone differently. Would she have really been the better fighter?

Pointless to wonder, she decided. Arya lifted up Needle again, dropping into a fighting stance again and with smirk, she said, “Go again?”

“I have responsibilities to attend to,” Jon protested. But he looked at Arya again and smiled. Arya had missed him so much in these past few years. Jon dropped back into a fighting stance.

Arya grinned as she took her big brother on once more. The best swordsman in the North, perhaps the best in all of Westeros. Her king.

After getting a full report of what had happened at Last Hearth and preparing next steps, Daenerys had announced a night of entertainment. She knew they faced a lot of fighting in the near future and she wanted to give her people at least one night of pleasure before she asked them to help her achieve the impossible. She had explained it to Tyrion as a morale booster. Both Tyrion and Varys had agreed with her though she had noticed Sansa and Jon didn’t look thrilled by the idea.

If Lady Stark and Lord Snow knew what else Daenerys planned to achieve from this night, they would disapprove even more. She had ordered finery rather than armor to be worn, something mostly directed at Jon. Though she doubted he understood why. But he would be the evening’s end.

Daenerys invited the northern lords and ladies above a certain age, along with her Dothraki bloodriders. They held the celebration of the King in the North’s return in the great hall. Daenerys wasn’t pleased to see that her men and Jon’s still separated themselves, but that would come eventually.
She hoped the wine tonight would help. Though she had reason to worry that it might just lead to fighting between the groups. She posted Unsullied to keep the peace, if necessary.

While rationing kept the meal from being a feast, Daenerys had saved some venison and boar for the occasion. The entertainment started with jugglers and flame eaters, allowing the wine to flow and everyone to relax.

Daenerys eyes stayed on her Dothraki mostly, as she remembered her wedding and Jorah’s words during it. “A Dothraki wedding with less than three deaths is considered a dull affair.”

She hoped the night would be dull by their standards, as she knew the Westerosi would neither understand nor try to. Furthermore, Daenerys would have agreed with them. They could afford no additional deaths against the enemy they faced. They would need every man.

Jon made a few attempts to speak with her, but she pointedly ignored him. She was almost surprised by how quickly he back off, letting her give him the silent treatment, but then she remembered how easily he sacrificed himself. Part of her heart ached for him, but she was still so angry with him.

When it got to the main entertainment of the evening, she knew everyone had been drinking for hours. Daenerys looked over the crowd, checking that there were no children present. Then she nodded, and her dancers were let in.

The trope had been a gift from Hizdahr zo Loraq. She remembered getting into an argument over slavery concerning them, as she watched them perform a lusty dance. The man that would have been her husband argued that it was only through slavery and raising them since birth to be dancers made them so skilled. Daenerys admitted to enjoying their dancing, but argued that it was possible they hadn’t wanted to be dancers, and that all men and women should have a right to choose their fates.

Once she freed them, Daenerys discovered that the trope either truly did enjoy dancing or knew nothing else. She still enjoyed watching them though, which seemed to please them.

She had warned them that Westeros was not Essos and they may need to tone down their routines for more conservative sensibilities. They hadn’t liked it, but obeyed, entertaining west and east alike many times in Dragonstone.

Tonight she had told them to go full force. When the leader bowed to her, a wicked glint in his eye, she smiled and nodded back, taking a sip of wine as the show began.

And it was a show to behold, the pulsing rhythm of the drums, the writhing bodies of the dancers. Daenerys noticed some Westerosi looking on with disgust, but some of the men were openly gaping, clearly aroused by the display. Though the Dothraki enjoyed every minute of it, used to such erotic fanfare.

Daenerys strove to look every inch the foreign queen, unaffected by the lustful display, sipping wine as if the dancing were boring her. She knew it would earn her no favors among the northern lords, who already called her the foreign whore, but what did that matter? She’d tried to act humble and maidly and that hadn’t worked.

Besides she didn’t care what they thought, her eyes were really only on one man.

She remembered back at Dragonstone, gossiping with Missandei. After a bottle of wine, Daenerys had confessed thinking the king may be a maid. Missandei had shook her head, “He may be
inexperienced, but he’s no maid.”

“What makes you say that?” the queen had asked, curious.

“He reminds me of Kai, supposedly the best bed slave of Astopher. The boy wasn’t much to look at, though pretty enough, and he looked completely innocent. He’d blush anytime anyone said even the slightest sexual thing. Yet behind closed doors, supposedly he turned into a sexual demon. He was said to make his partners come twice within minutes and could last for hours.”

Daenerys had asked, “Do you know whatever happened to this Kai?”

“I didn’t know him well. My master’s tastes weren’t inclined to his talents. But I heard rumor that he was saving to buy his freedom. He had a girl he wanted to marry.”

Daenerys smiled sadly. She hoped this man had gotten his wish, hoped she had given him freedom and a better life. One where his talents would be for his wife alone. “And you think the King in the North would be like this Kai? I’m not sure. I hear it’s cold and dreary in the North.”

“They also say the wolf’s blood runs hot, your grace.”

They had laughed at the time, moving on to the next topic. But Daenerys knew now. Knew that the cold king probably could rival an Essos bedslave. Perhaps not in pure technique, Jon was a bit inexperienced after all, but he had many talents and suited her needs perfectly. Better than anyone before him.

Then again, perhaps she was just a lovesick fool, who’d been too long without a bed partner.

Daenerys glanced to the man once more. She knew he was no maid. She knew just how well leashed he kept the sexual beast he could be. He’d had his tongue on nearly every bit of skin she had, yet still she watched as he blushed at the entertainment. It amused her. He’d fucked her for hours on that boat, yet he still could barely watch dancers grind against each other.

It was enduring, or it would be if she wasn’t still furious with him for leaving her behind.

When the dancing began, Jon felt a mix of feelings. He loved Daenerys and her exotic nature. She had been born at Dragonstone, was native Westerosi, and Jon hated that so many called her the foreign whore, but her otherworldly Targaryen looks combined with her strange habits and customs picked up during her time in Essos made her so alluring to him. But displays like this dance that was so forward in its erotism, he knew it made his bannermen uncomfortable and didn’t endear her to them.

His own personal reaction to the dance -- just made him miss her more and curse his foolishness for leaving her behind.

Jon tried to watch, but his eyes kept darting away. It was like looking at the sun, his eyes couldn’t linger, only catch glances. He could feel the flames on his cheeks.

Gods, he thought. Sansa was here, on his left. She shouldn’t be. This wasn’t proper entertainment for ladies. Daenerys should know that. Or at least, Tyrion should have known and stopped her from this madness.
He chanced a glance and despite her blush, she looked more intrigued than embarrassed.

Jon didn’t look at her again. He finished his wine, looking away from the writhing bodies for a refill. With his glass full again, and no other possible distractions, as everyone he was seated with at the high table was clearly enthralled by the show, he had no choice but to watch.

It was unlike anything he’d ever seen before. Perfect bodies moving in a way that so perfectly replicated sex, it seemed indecent. Yet now that Jon watched he could hardly look away.

As the feelings of lust rose in him, Jon struggled not to look at Dany. What game was she playing with this? Was this some kind of cruel foreplay? Jon didn’t know that he cared. He wanted her so much. He’d missed her. His eyes, unable to heed the commands of his brain, kept drifting to the queen next to him.

She looked as cool and collected as ever. Only by the hitch of her breathing could Jon tell she was affected. It was a tell that he’d figured out on that boat, an almost imperceptible change that he noticed sometimes following their evening meals that came shortly before she would excuse herself to retire to her room. He’d learned quickly enough that it was his cue to join her soon after.

Remembering those nights on that boat wasn’t helping his current situation. Jon shifted around trying to disguise his obvious arousal. Daenerys’ hand “accidentally” brushed against his thigh and Jon was almost surprised to find he could damn near come from that contact alone.

It had been too long. He wanted her too much.

Gods, he wanted to throw her down on the table here and now and fuck her. How could he have thought even for a moment to give this up? What did it matter who he really was? He wanted Daenerys. By the gods, he would move all seven heavens and hells to have her.

When the dancing finally finished to a mixed reaction, most people clapping automatically as if coming out of a daze, Daenerys stood. She turned to look at him and held out a hand. “Escort me to my room?” She asked it innocently, but Jon knew it wasn’t innocent at all.

His eyes narrowed, she damn well knew he couldn’t stand in his finery, not with a hard-on. His thin, silk tunic and legging hid nothing. No wonder she’d insisted he not wear his armor tonight. He looked to his empty cup and lied. “It would honor me, your grace, but I would like to stay a moment longer and finish my drink.”

Her eyes narrowed but she nodded. “Good night, then. I hope you enjoy your time alone in your bedchambers, my lord. You’ve been away from them for so long.”

Sansa, suddenly stood as well, “I’ll join you, your grace.”

Jon didn’t understand, but he watched his sister take Daenery’s arm. They leaned in to whisper to each other as they left the great hall.

During his return to Winterfell, Jon had often wondered if pissing off his sisters or his queen would be worse. After that display, he had his answer.

Daenerys. Pissed Daenerys was worse than his sisters.
One to Love (The Dangers of Prophecies)

Winterfell. Jaime looked upon the castle where it seemed like everything had started with a royal visit all those years ago. Throwing that boy out the window had caused a war between his family and the Starks. Loving Cersei above everything else had destroyed their children and threw the Seven Kingdoms into years of war. Jaime knew he should regret it, but he couldn’t regret loving her. He’d done so much for that love, sacrificed so much. He looked back at his too few men, who looked weary.

He understood. He was sick of war too.

In his youth he had spent so much time dreaming of the knight and war hero he would become. Facing the reality of his life had been a bitter tonic.

But he could do this one thing. Fight in the only war that actually mattered. It would at least add a sentence to his entry in the book about the members of the Kingsguard.

Let people call him kingslayer, he’d done the right thing killing Aerys. Let people condemn for abandoning his queen and sister as well as his child, they already hated him for loving her. Let the dragon queen and her pet wolf condemn him for not bringing what was promised, he’d done the best he could.

Let the world think he had shit for honor, he knew he was better than most men.

Bronn and his horse strode up beside them. “Well, they haven’t fired on us with arrows yet. And I don’t see those damn dragons wiping us out. Not that I can see much in this fucking darkness. Still, that’s a good start.”

Jaime flinched at the mention of dragons. That had been the worst battle he’d ever been in. And he’d been fighting in wars since he was 15. The Dothraki earned their reputation, they had been a tough enemy, one he could admit now he might not have ever been able to beat. But the dragon? That had been impossible to stand against. They had been helpless against it.

The Targaryens finally made sense to him. He’d watched as the Mad King did horrible things, guarded the noble prince and his family, but he’d never understood what made that family so special. They’d always just seemed like another version of his own to him. It’s why the Lannisters fit so well as the new royal family. He’d seen the skulls of the dragons in Aerys’ throne room, but it had never clicked just how terrifying it would be to face one in real life.

Jaime removed all of that from his mind. Straightening himself in his saddle and riding forward with a confidence he wasn’t sure he actually had.

The heavy gate of Winterfell opened to him.

The likeness wasn’t very good. Jon’s eyes studied the statue of Ned Stark. He kept his eyes trained, as he didn’t want to accidentally catch a glimpse of his mother’s statue. Wasn’t quite ready for that yet.
“You could have told me.” He said, looking into the stone eyes. “Should have told me before I went to the Wall, not waited. I can’t hate you, but I just…” Jon wished he was better with words. “I have so many questions. How much did you know? Why not tell anyone, not even your wife? I know you didn’t tell Catelyn. I doubt she would have hated me so much as a nephew. If you told me, things might be different.” Jon thought about it for a moment. How much really would have changed? “Maybe not. I still would have joined the Wall. Is that why you encouraged it in the end, or at least didn’t stop me? To save me from Robert’s wrath even if he did find out? It was the only safe place for a Targaryen. Sending me across the Narrow Sea to the rest of them and hoping for the best wasn’t an option if you’d promised to keep me safe.”

Jon closed his eyes and looked up. His thoughts swirled. “I wish I could talk to you. You were my father, no matter my blood, and I could use some advice. Even more than when you died and Robb went to war, more than I was Lord Commander, more than when I fought to take back Winterfell. This is when I need you.” Jon shook his head. “I don’t know what to do with this information. I mostly want to ignore it, continue living the lie you told.” Jon looked at the statue, picturing Ned’s real human face over the cold stone. But the real image was hard to find, it’d been so long since he’d seen him last. Years since Ned Stark’s death. That almost upset him the most. That he couldn’t properly remember his father’s face. “I’m so confused. I don’t know what to do,” Jon’s voice cracked. “I need you right now. I need to know what you would do because I don’t know you anymore.”

He could feel the tears coming, but he didn’t let them fall.

“Why are you down here?” The voice startled him, but it was familiar enough.

“You planning on falling me around now?”

“Maybe.”

Jon turned to see his little sister. He couldn’t read her as well as he used to, so he didn’t know how long she’d been standing there. It was odd to feel like he didn’t know her the way he used to. He tried to joke, “You’ve gotten better at that, sneaking up on people. You used to not have the patience for true stealth.”

She frowned, reminding Jon of the girl he’d once known so well. His favorite little sister, who it turned out was his favorite cousin. The smile disappeared from Jon’s face. She looked at the face of Ned Stark. “They did a shit job. Doesn’t look anything like him. I told Sansa.”

Jon’s eyebrow raised at Arya’s language. He’d heard it before, but it was still so jarring to hear out of his once relatively innocent sister’s, cousin’s, mouth. What would Catelyn Stark say if she could hear her youngest daughter? “We can’t afford to fix it now. Maybe after the battle we can commission a new one.” He thought about how his memories of what Ned Stark looked like had faded. What would he tell the artist carving it?

“What if no one who remembers what he looked like lives through the battle? Then future generations of Starks will think our father looked like some gaunt-faced Southerner.”

It felt like another stab in the heart, to hear Arya refer to him as their father so casually. So as a matter-of-fact. Jon knew it was true as far as she knew, knew it was true as Ned Stark had raised him as his own. But Jon just didn’t have time to deal with any of the confusion he felt. He had to focus on the army of the dead. He had to put all of his effort and energy into defeating the Night King. His personal issues, his identity, were nothing in the grand scheme of things. “You, Sansa and Bran will survive to produce the next generations of Starks. You will be around to fix it.”
Arya’s eyes met his. They were so like his. Everyone had said growing up that Arya had looked like Lyanna Stark, his mother. Jon studied her features, imagining seeing his own mother in them. He longed to know more about her now, but who was still alive to remember her? Maybe Arya was the closest he’d ever get. She responded, “You’ll be around too. I just got you back. I don’t intend to lose you again. Not while I have breathe in my body.”

“I’m not going to leave you again,” Jon promised.

“You already did,” Arya’s anger was clear. “You left after promising me that you wouldn’t.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“I don’t want you to be sorry. I want you not to do stupid things like that. I want you not to die.”

He had no response to that. Jon knew he couldn’t make that promise. There was no way he could guarantee he wouldn’t die. Not with the fight they had ahead of them.

“The Dragon Queen seemed quite angry with you as well.” Jon stiffened, sensing a trap. She was upset and angry with him, he knew. He’d missed her. His bed felt even lonelier knowing she was just doors away rather than miles. He wanted her, but he wasn’t sure where they stood. He knew he should just talk to her, but he feared the worst. With the uncertainty, at least there was still some hope. “She must really care for you,” Arya said.

Jon lied, “The Queen doesn’t especially care for me; she just doesn’t like being disobeyed.”

Arya studied him. “You’re lying.”

Jon didn’t know what to say to that. He was lying. He knew the queen cared about him, no matter how upset she was. Seven hells, part of the reason she was so upset with him probably was because she cared about him. He just let the silence stretch.

Arya stepped forward and Jon noticed she was hiding something behind her back. “What do you have there?”

Jon almost worried it might be a blade for his neck. Arya still seemed angry with him too. But she pulled out a miniature wolf, carved out of white limestone. She held it out to him, and carefully Jon picked it up to study it.

The art style was different than anything he’d ever seen but still quite beautiful. He looked to Arya for an explanation. “I got it in Braavos. I wanted to give it to you for your name day. But of course, you weren’t here.” She looked at him with a scowl.

Jon was touched. He had completely forgotten about his name day. He attempted to sort out the timeline in his mind. It must have had happened on the trip up to beyond the Wall. Jon had spent the first day of his twenty fourth year freezing on a boat overthinking a queen’s final words to him. He said, “Thank you, Arya.”

She hugged him. Jon hugged her back. It was nice to see that no matter how upset Arya might get with him, no matter what she might have learned about the blood in his veins, nothing important between them would change.

Into his chest, Arya asked, “Who was she anyway?”

Jon didn’t understand. He pushed her back a bit to look at her. “What?”
“Your mother. Who was she?”

They didn’t know. Jon’s eyes closed. They didn’t know. “You don’t know?”

“No, Bran just told us he told you who your mother was. He thought you should tell us who.”

Jon wasn’t sure if he was relieved or upset by that revelation. Gods, he still had to tell them. He’d thought he’d been given that small mercy. He had that they had known and dealt with the truth while he’d been away. That they’d all collectively decided to deal with it later. But they didn’t know.

Daenerys didn’t know that he was a threat to her throne. They hadn’t had a chance to talk yet. Jon had spent most of his time back briefing everyone else on what had happened with the Night King and his new dragon, as well as catching up on everything he’d missed. He hadn’t gotten any time alone with her, and he wasn’t sure if he was ready to speak with her about everything just yet anyway. So they were currently both avoiding each other.

And that tough conversation just got a lot tougher.

Fuck, Jon thought. “Arya, my mother…”

“Your grace,” a voice interrupted him.

Jon turned and saw one of his northern lord’s squires approaching. He struggled to remember the boy’s name. Something simple, Marc, maybe? He shifted into what he was beginning to think of as king mode. “What is it?”

“The Kingslayer has arrived.”

Jon looked back to the statue. This could wait, it had to. He turned and ordered, “Inform the queen and assemble the small council.”

“Yes, your grace.” The boy gave a little bow and ran off.

Jon gave his father’s crypt one last look, wishing for more time before he stalked off.

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“We can’t trust a kingslayer, a Lannister!”

Daenerys was almost amused to see Jon looked as frustrated as she’d been trying to keep the northern lords focused and happy. “We need to put aside past grudges and grievances. The enemy we fight is greater than any past deeds.”

“All due respect, your grace, but you weren’t there. You didn’t watch this man,” Lord Manderly spit out the word as if it didn’t describe the former Kingsguard Commander. Jaime Lannister didn’t react to the insult. He kept up his look of smug, care-free confidence. The one he always wore. Sansa wondered how true the look was, or if it was just like the mask she’d always worn in King Joffrey's court. “You didn’t watch this man cut through our forces. Didn’t watch him murder one good man after another.”

“We were at war,” the kingslayer said. “If I had put down my sword would have you gentle north men just gone back to your homes and left me and my army alone?”
“Stop,” Jon commanded. “It doesn’t matter anymore. We need to put it aside and fight together now.”

“The death of your lord father doesn’t matter?”

A strange look passed over Jon’s face at that comment, one Daenerys didn’t understand. But Jon answered calmly, “No. Not in this fight.”

The northern lords started up again, but Jon stopped them. “Joffrey’s dead. He’s the king who ordered for Ned Stark’s head. What more do you lords want? Justice was served. Revenge had. That king is dead, along with his grandfather, sister and brother. Four Lannisters dead for four Starks. Three Lannisters alive, three Starks alive. It’s over. We’re done talking about this now.”

Daenerys nearly rolled her eyes. She knew that wouldn’t work. King or not, these northern lords didn’t like listening to anyone, obeying any orders. Daenerys longed for a glass of wine. She feared it was a bad habit she’d picked up from her Hand. Her eyes looked out over the angry Westerosi lords to her own warriors who looked bored by these politics. The Unsullied had been slaves and didn’t truly understand arguing against orders from a master, free or not. The Dothraki didn’t fight with words. If a bloodrider didn’t want to obey their khal, they challenged them and the stronger would rule. It was that simple. Her eyes kept moving.

She was surprised to find one of Lannister’s men staring at her, an intense look she couldn’t quite decipher. It wasn’t lust or desire or hatred in his gaze, it was something else. She made a note to ask Tyrion who the man was after the meeting.

Tyrion tried to intercede. “We’re not here to discuss the past, we’re here for future planning. Let’s move past this and talk about…”

A northern lady cut the dwarf off, “Of course the imp takes his brother’s side.”

Jon spoke again, “We need every fighting man to fight the Night King and his army. We can’t afford to execute this man.”

Before any additional protests could be mounted, Daenerys settled the issue, “He killed my father, a king. He attempted to murder me. I will decide later what is to be done for Jaime Lannister’s justice. Right now we need to hear what information he has.” No one denied her the right though the lords seemed unsatisfied about it. She turned to Jaime, “Ser Lannister, where is the rest of your army?”

All eyes turned to the kingslayer. The Lannister knight seemed comfortable with the attention though Daenerys thought she spotted some hesitancy in his eyes. His voice didn’t betray such feelings though, clear and cool, “There is no rest of my army. The men I brought with me are all that will be coming.”

Daenerys’ chest tightened. Had she burned that many? No, she didn’t think so. Why hadn’t she listened to Jon Snow straight away? She tried to suppress her feelings of regret, if she looked back, she’d be lost.

Tyrion, his voice more personal than usual at these meetings, “What do you mean Jaime? Surely there’s more Lannister men than…”

Jaime cut him off. “Cersei’s betrayed us all. She’s…” Jaime stopped, licking his lips before continuing, “She’s mad. She’s sent for the Gold Company and I’m sure has something else up her sleeve. She doesn’t trust me anymore. I don’t know that she trusts anyone anymore.”
No one said anything for a moment.

"Why would Cersei do that?" Daenerys asked.

Sansa answered, "Cersei plans for us to fight each other, kill her enemies for her. Then she can defeat the weakened army left behind."

Daenerys shook her head; that made no sense. "You don’t betray someone until after you have what you want. She couldn’t possibly want the dead to win."

"She doesn’t see the Night King as a threat." Sansa looked at Daenerys directly. "She only sees you. She only wants her throne. Nothing else matters to her. The rest of the world could burn as long as she ruled over the ashes."

Daenerys’ jaw tightened. "She’s right to fear me. I’ll burn her alive if I ever see her again."

The room shifted in the uncomfortably. Tyrion began, "Your grace, you cannot…"

Daenerys met his eyes. "I might have shown mercy to a queen who put aside our fight for a common enemy. Cersei Lannister has betrayed every ally she ever had, she murdered her own uncle along with her in-laws, and she would let the realm die for her own gain. She has shown us time and again why she cannot be trusted. I see her for what she is now. She is a wild, mad beast that must put down. For her own good as much as the realm’s.” Her eyes connected with Jaime. “Just like my father.”

Daenerys looked to their northern allies, expecting them to show the same angry reaction they had to learning about the Tarlys. But they didn’t look horrified. They looked agreeable. Had she finally done something right? Sansa spoke, “Be careful, your grace. Cersei has killed everyone whoever stood against her. Even strong ones no one thought would fall. You are the final enemy left.”

“There’s a reason for that. My enemies, even the strong ones, are gone now too. Her husband destroyed my family and put me through fire, but true dragons don’t fear fire. Lions may rip apart flowers, suns, krakens, and wolves, but they will burn before a dragon.”

Daenerys didn’t let her threat hang, focused back onto the details, what she could control. She turned again to Ser Lannister. “Where will she attack first?”

“What does that matter?” Tyrion asked, the frustration clear in his voice.

“The Reach and Dorne pledged their support to me. What kind of queen would I be to leave them to the mercy of your sister?”

“You can’t fight two wars at once.”

Daenerys rubbed her head. She had been surrounded by madness her entire life, it ran in her veins, and she still didn’t know the best counter for it. She thought for a minute before she ordered Lord Tarly to be sent for. Tyrion asked why. Daenerys almost answered because your queen commanded it, sick of Tyrion’s arguments.

“If your sister is clever, she will allow the lords of the Reach to abandon me and defect to her. Why would they not? All they’ve gained from their alliance with me is the Tyrells gone and High Garden sacked. They have no reason not to. Tarly knows his homeland, he may know which houses most likely to turn and which may hold more loyalty to Targaryens. After all, they supported my father and brother in the last war.”
“But you’re not worried about Dorne?”

“Dorne and the North have always been the two hardest kingdoms to control. Dorne is strong enough to keep their princes and princesses and resisted Aegon the Conqueror. They will wait Cersei out once they find their new leader. She has no reason to attack them right now. And if she did attack them, she’d fail.”

“Still, this complicates matters,” Jon said. He was looking directly at her, and Daenerys hated how his gaze still made her stomach flutter. How could he be so pretty? How could she feel so much for him? She tried to remember her anger with him, how he’d abandoned her when she needed him and hadn’t even the good grace to tell her why.

Daenerys knew it was unfair for her to be so angry with Jon, as she hadn’t heard his full reasons. She hadn’t really given him a chance to explain himself upon his return. But patience was always a struggle for her while her temper was easy and quick. As a queen, she had grown used to getting answers and having people obey her commands. It was frustrating to have a man who continued to do as he pleased.

But then, him being a king, a leader in his own right, was what attracted her to him in the first place. He’d been one of the first people, perhaps the only person, who she connected with on every level. A man who made her feel like she wasn’t alone for the first time in her life. How could she punish him for being himself? For being the fool who did stupid, brave things?

She couldn’t hate him for that, but she could be frustrated with him. She hadn’t been lying to Tyrion, she hated the way heroes did stupid things and died. She didn’t want Jon Snow to die; she’d only just found him.

Neither of them had had the time to talk through everything. She had tried once, but he’d been too busy, too tired. She hadn’t tried again, which was on her, though some gut instinct of hers wanted to put it off. She couldn’t explain why, but she knew whatever had driven Jon away would be bad news for them. Why she felt that way about the identity of Jon’s mother, she didn’t know, but she did know that Jon wouldn’t leave without good reason. She knew the only way to put it to rest was to talk it through, but they hadn’t done that yet.

She tried to put her feelings aside. They had no place here and now. But it was hard to look at Jon and not think about it. It was impossible for her to look at him and feel nothing. She clung to her queenly mask. She could show no weakness in this hall. She had to be a queen, not a woman.

Tyrion spoke next, drawing her attention away from the man who would be her king. “We have our own sellsword army. Send for the Second Sons.”

Daenerys gave Tyrion a hard look. “I will not leave Meereen open for the slavers to retake.”

“That was over a year ago. The region is stabilized. Leave some to guard it, but the rest could sail for the North. Let them fight the Golden Company.”

“Even with the most favorable conditions, it would take them at least a month to get here.”

“The Golden Company won’t travel much faster.”

Daenerys looked away with sour face. Jon spoke up. “We need every man to win this fight. If they will fight for you…”

“They will,” Daenerys confirmed softly.
“Call for them,” Sansa agreed with her brother.

“I will think on it.”

Tyrion looked like he wanted to say more, but he let it go. Daenerys thought about everything she knew about the Gold Company, how they operated. Tyrion had told her that the Iron Throne was deeply in debt. Even with the Tyrell gold, how did they manage to fund a sellsword army like the Gold Company?

So she asked, “How is Cersei paying for this?”

All eyes turned to Jaime Lannister. He didn’t look affected by the attention. “The Iron Bank,” he answered simply.

“Why would Cersei have the allegiance of the Iron Bank?” Daenerys asked.

“They benefited from the slave trade you ended,” Tyrion pointed out.

But Daenerys shook her head. “Braavos is a city of freed slaves. They may have profited from it, but they personally despised it.”

“The Iron Bank only cares about profits.”

“The Iron Bank wouldn’t back a losing horse. Why would they think she could win?”

“They probably don’t believe the stories about the dead army. All they see is a queen abandoning her fight for the throne to go north.”

Daenerys knew there was some truth to that, but she still thought something sounded off. “We’re missing something.”

“What did Cersei do with the Tyrell gold then, if not pay for her army?” Tyrion asked his brother.

“She paid off the crown’s debt.”

Tyrion snorted, to the queen’s surprise. “Cersei is a fool for paying off that debt.” Everyone looked to him. “My father always said that if you owe the bank 100 dragons that’s your problem. But if you owe the bank 100,000 dragons that’s the bank’s problem. The Iron Bank had vested interest to keep her on the throne because she’d already agreed to pay the debt. And a Lannister always pays their debts.” He looked to his queen. “When you take the throne, you could have claimed that debt wasn’t the crown’s; it was the usurper’s and they should go after the Baratheon family. Getting nothing. Which is exactly what I would have advised. So they wanted Cersei to win. However, now they are back to being a truly neutral party. They have their money; they don’t care who wins.”

“But they don’t have their money,” Sansa pointed out. “Cersei took out another loan.”

Daenerys noticed how restless the lords were getting. Financial talk was never stimulating. This was a discussion for the small council, not the full meeting of lords. She opened her mouth to move along to the next subject, but Jon beat her to it. “We should discuss battle plans, now that we know what kind of numbers the Lannisters will be providing.” Jon’s eyes glanced over to the Lannister. “Or lack of numbers.”

Jaime bristled at the implication. “We might have a larger army to bring if someone hadn’t burned most of my army up.”
Daenerys glared at the golden-haired lion. “If not for your army’s actions, we’d have three more houses and kingdoms supporting us with their armies and resources.”

Jon added, “Besides, your army is not actually here. Just a fraction of what you could gather.”

Ser Jaime shut up.

Jon said, “The Dreadfort is lost. The dragon burned down the keep.”

Daenerys wished Jon had eased into that announcement a bit more. Bran had told them this morning with about the same amount of tact, but she expected better from Jon.

“How many escaped?” someone asked.

Jon shook his head. “We don’t have an exact count, but it sounds like not many.”

Tyrion said, “It’s not surprising. We all knew the strongholds before Winterfell were unlikely to hold the Night King and his army off for long. We need to predict his next move and figure out a way to take down his dragon.” Tyrion looked to his brother. “Any ideas?”

“Why are you looking at me?” Jaime scoffed.

Tyrion inclined his head. “Don’t tell me you developed no plans on how to take out dragons.”

“They didn’t work.” Jaime exchanged a look with Daenerys. He seemed afraid, she a bit proud. It had been a great victory for her and her army, even if she regretted the loss of life fiercely.

“Well, we need ideas,” Sansa said. She looked to Daenerys. “Do you know how to kill dragons?”

The queen could feel her heart stop, thinking of her lost son. She pulled herself together and replied coldly, “Why would I know?”

“They are your so-called children. I would think you learn their weaknesses before bringing them to battle.”

Daenerys swallowed her first response as well as her tears. Her eyes darted as she considered something to say. All eyes were on her. She was the Dragon Queen, what would she be without them. It wasn’t unreasonable to expect her to be the most knowledgeable about her own children. “Dragon scales get tougher as they get older. The one good thing I can think of about Viserion falling to the Night King is that he won’t grow bigger, tougher or stronger than he is now. Drogon and Rhaegal will continue to grow.”

“How does that help us?” Sansa asked, clearly annoyed.

Daenerys curled her hands into fists, her fingernails digging into her palms as she struggled to keep the emotion from her voice. She was trying for an informative tone, “Dragons respond to their environments. You lock them up, you put them in chains, you surround them with the dead, and they will not grow. They are intelligent, but as a wight, Viserion is just a more dangerous wight. He will have no agency. And the Night King will struggle to pull the same trick twice. Drogon and Rhaegal know to watch for him and his spears now. They’ve already proven this.”

The queen’s eyes met Jon’s as he’d told them all what had happened at Last Hearth. She’d seen her children dodge spears, wary of them during her own battle.

“You aren’t answering my question.”
The queen finally lost her temper. “Because I don’t know how to answer. Dragons can be killed with spears, but only in certain weak spots in their scales. Dragons can kill other dragons, previous wars taught us that. If Drogon or Rhaegal could get close enough they might at least be able to rip his wings off, take him down, or even rip his throat out, but I don’t know that it would be worth the risk of the Night King gaining a second dragon.” Her voice cracked as she thought of her sweet boy, who was a just a tool of evil now. “Viserion was the kind, gentle one. His brothers are the aggressive ones. He was the one who liked to be petted the most. He curled up with me as a babe. Do you have any idea what it’s like for me to imagine ways to kill my child?” Daenerys took a deep breath, holding back the tears that threatened to fall.

Viserion was supposed to be the better version of her brother. Her brother who had started so sweetly and turned so bad. Was her child doomed as soon as she’d named him? Maybe she should have called him something else. Names had power. Had she always been doomed to fail as a mother?

She felt Jon’s hand force her fingers to unclench. She blinked, brought back from her despair, comforted by the touch. She turned to look at him, their eyes connecting, but Jon gave no indication of what their hands were doing to their wider audience. She remembered herself.

Jon said, “Viserion is already dead, Daenerys. He died beyond the Wall. This thing we’re fighting now is a monster the Night King raised. One we need to destroy if we’re going to survive.”

Daenerys nodded. Jon was right. Of course he was, but it didn’t make the pain lessen any. She took a deep breath. “A trap might work best. Lure the Night King and his dragon into a hard to escape place, one that forces him low to the ground. Kill them both. The wings are a dragon’s weakest points. We attack those first. Wights don’t heal, so any damage we can do will be permanent. And if he can’t fly, he’ll be much less dangerous.”

Everyone nodded, pleased with her plan. So why didn’t Daenerys feel pleased? Why did she feel like something awful had settled in her gut?

Jon’s hand didn’t let go and Daenerys was slightly ashamed of how tightly she clung to the small comfort. She glanced at him, wondering what she had ever done to deserve him.

Samwell Tarly entered at that moment. He looked at Jon. “You summoned me, your grace?”

“I did,” Daenerys said. “I need you to compose a list of all the noble families in the Reach and the level of their allegiance to the Targaryens.”

Sam’s eyes drifted to Jon again, which slightly annoyed Daenerys. Her tone went a little sharper as she asked. “Can you do that, Lord Tarly?”

“Yes,” he nodded, his chins wobbling with the force. “Yes, of course, my lady, I mean, your grace.”

Jon’s hand tightened slightly on hers. And Daenerys found comfort in the hidden gesture. Tyrion asked, “Are we only planning on rescuing the loyal families in the Reach, your grace?”

“No, but I would prefer to start with families that won’t fight me every step of the way in their rescue.” She purposely didn’t look out at the northern lords and ladies, knowing if she did, she would glare at them with accusation.

“We need another plan for Cersei,” Tyrion said. “She may not have the patience to wait for the Gold Company’s arrival, especially with Jaime here.”
Daenerys gave Jon’s hand one last squeeze before letting go, folding her hands in plain view. “What do you propose?”

Tyrion wiped his chin, thinking for a moment. “Maybe we should use Westerosi troops…”

Jon spoke up before his people could, “No. We are fighting for our lands, we’re staying here.”

Tyrion sighed, but he focused on Jon, inclining his head, clearly thinking about something. He said, “I just realized, your stupidity at the Dragonpit may have been a good thing.”

Jon looked annoyed at Tyrion. “What do you mean?”

“Cersei wanted you to pledge to stay out of it. So that after she betrayed you both, your hands would have been tied in retaliating. Granted, I would have argued that you’re not expected to keep faith with those who betray you. But it might have worked to keep you out of the fight. It was worth the risk.”

“It wasn’t stupidity, it was honor.”

“It was stupidity,” Jaime argued. “Why would Cersei help you after you confessed to already bending the knee to the Targaryen queen?”

“What?” Lord Glover said, all of the heads of the northern houses turning to their king now.

Daenerys wanted to show her support somehow, but she knew it would be best if she stayed out of it. Jon stood, looking every inch the king he’d been made. The king she planned to make him again. “In exchange for her dragons and her armies, her support in our fight against the Army of the Dead, I pledged our support to her cause. I bent the knee, accepting the title Warden in the North.”

The room exploded in anger. There were cries of “traitor,” “coward,” and “bastard.” Jon’s face didn’t react, he remained hard in the face of the chaos. He waited for it to settle some, waited for the lords to begin objecting one at a time.

Lord Glover, once again, was quick to take the lead, “We never should have made a bastard king.”

“But you did because you had to. We needed her help and you all know that. I know it’s not what you want, but it’s what has to be.”

Lord Glover spoke again, “We don’t have listen to someone named Snow.”

Jon shut down him down immediately. “I’m still your warden. You’re still my bannerman. You’ll do as I say.”

Daenerys had never been more attracted to him, but then she thought about how he could have stopped most of the crap she had to deal with if he’d been here.

Another spoke out, one of the ladies this time, bitterly quipping, “Another Stark boy taken in by a foreign whore.”

Jon whipped his head, anger in his voice. “My brother wasn’t betrayed by his foreign wife or a Targaryen, he was murdered and betrayed by his northern bannerman and his Westerosi ally. Toherrn Stark was the King who Knelt and my brother was the King who Lost the North, and I’m sure I’ll get some dismissive nickname too, but I don’t care. As long as the North survives the Long Night.”
Daenerys decided it was time to move on, but before she could say anything one of the younger lords grumbled, “The bastard fool king who was seduced out of his kingdom is what they’ll call you, Snow.”

She stood, her anger aroused now. “How dare you speak that way of my Warden of the North. I can handle your disrespect, but you will not speak that way about him. Do you people not know the man you made your king? Even if I had tried to seduce him, he wouldn’t have fallen for it. He’s too honorable. All he cares about are you, his people and your survival.”

She could feel Jon’s eyes on her, but she refused to look at him. She worried if she saw him, she wouldn’t be able to hide her love for him. She would have to respond to a need to kiss him, not caring who saw them. So she didn’t look, tried to keep on the mask of a queen.

A glance to Tyrion told her that she probably wasn’t doing too good of a job. Her defense too passionate, too full of emotion. Still she sneered, “You good northern people don’t deserve him.”

Fed up, Daenerys ended the meeting by leaving, her train of people following her out.

Sansa reflected on everything that had happened in that meeting. She was still deciding how productive it had been, informative certainly, but they were trying to bring everyone together and what had just happened would only drive everyone further apart.

They should have announced that Jon had bent the knee on the first night of his return. They shouldn’t have let Jaime Lannister spill the beans. That had made it so much worse.

Jon sat in his seat, stone-faced, mind clearly on something. Sansa stayed behind as everyone else filed out, with Davos and Tormund staying as well. Ser Davos, in his wry tone, said, “That went well.”

The wilding’s eyebrow rose. “It did?”

Davos shrugged. “No one is dead yet, so it could have been much worse.”

Sansa almost agreed with that. They had managed to have Stark and Lannister men in the same room together without bloodshed. That could almost be called a success.

Jon said, “We need to get five armies to come together as one yesterday.” His fingers brushed over his lips, his thumb on his chin. He pulled his hand away, moving his fingers into a fist. “Five into one.” Jon brought his fist back to lean into it again. “Any ideas as to how we make that happen?”

“Fighting,” Tormund said. “We’ve been fighting with you southerners for nearly two years now. Most of your men don’t even glare at me anymore.”

“Northerners, Tormund. You’ve fought with northerners. You need to learn the difference now that some real southerners are here.”

“Do the men from the Westerlands count as southerners?” Davos asked.

“In the north, they do,” Jon answered. “We need to unite our fighting forces and quickly.”

“Have the dragon queen on her black demon threaten to burn anyone who doesn’t obey.” Tormund
said. “Seeing her beasts in action.” Tormund shook his head. “Only a fucking idiot wouldn’t kneel.”

Jon shook his head. “Threats would only be a temporary solution. We need something more permanent but just as immediate. They need to love her.”

“Love is a disease,” Sansa said. Every man’s head swiveled her way. She continued. “It’s a poison, a sweet poison, but it kills just the same.” Her eyes connected with Jon’s, her mind snapping to the strange behavior she’d observed between her half-brother and the queen he’d brought to them. “You need to be feared, Jon.”

Jon’s eyes narrowed. “Said like a woman who’s never been in love. It can be a poison, Sansa. It can also be a cure, an elixir to keep you alive and fighting. Fear alone is not a good way to rule. You need love to temper it.”

“It works for Cersei.”

“For now,” Jon agreed. “But fear only works if you are thing the people fear most. I know you haven’t seen the dead, Sansa, but trust me, if the dead invaded King’s Landing, they wouldn’t fear Cersei most.”

Sansa shook her head. No, the sun could be gone, the dead could walk, and Cersei would still manage to be the most terrifying thing in the Seven Kingdoms. Sansa thought about how even now, Cersei sat on the Iron Throne still intent on destroying her enemies, still focusing all her hatred on Sansa and her family and their new ally. “In the great game, you win or you die,” Sansa echoed Cersei’s words.

“We’re not playing a game, especially not the great one. We’re fighting for survival. If we don’t win, all will die.”

Sansa said nothing, but Jon’s words reminded her of her time at King’s Landing where she learned so much. She stayed alive but it was a constant battle. She had no one to trust and knew one misstep would cost her everything.

Then again, had she known the monster that awaited her future in the north, maybe it would have been better to die.

But then, she’d lived through that too. Sansa had been fighting to live since going south, she knew this game better than anyone.

Jon looked to the other men. “I think we’ve discussed enough for now.” Davos gave a slight bow before taking his leave, but Tormund just left.

This left Sansa alone with her brother. He looked upset. “What’s your problem, Sansa?”

“My problem,” Sansa nearly shrieked. “I don’t have any problems. Except thousands to feed in the Long Winter, armies surrounding Winterfell who are all ready to fight each other, and of course, an undead dragon that even this dragon queen you brought with you doesn’t know how to defeat.”

Jon stood, definitely angry now. “We’re solving those problems, but that does remind me, you need to be nicer to her.”

Sansa couldn’t believe it. Was Jon, Jon of all people, actually giving her a lecture about decorum? Was he taking some foreign invader’s (granted a seemingly kind and good one) word over his family’s? Sansa’s voice cooled, “What?”
“A good equivalent to what you did in that meeting to Daenerys would be like if someone asked you how to kill Lady after you watched her die.”

Sansa still missed Lady. Still despised Joffrey and Cersei (and even her father a little bit) for killing her. She pushed the pain down though to focus on why Jon was doing this. He didn’t usually give a rip about politeness. If the hard questions had to be asked, what was the point in sugarcoating it. He was so like their father in that way.

There was only one reason she could think of as to why Jon seemed to care that Sansa might have hurt Daenerys Targaryen. Sansa didn’t want to ask him outright though. He might just lie. “You know, Petyr had a theory as to why you were at Dragonstone so long.” Odd that she could finally call him by the name he’d always wanted only after he was gone.

Jon rolled his eyes. “I’m sure he did.”

“He said you were trying to marry her.”

Jon’s silence told Sansa everything she needed to know. She nodded. “He was right, you know. It would make good political sense. Together you’d be difficult to beat.”

“Sansa…”

“No. You do whatever you want, Jon. Just like you always do, and we’ll all just wait here and hope for the best.”

“Fine. You want to talk about it. It has been discussed that I marry Daenerys. Not decided, just discussed. Lord Manderly wants me to take one of his granddaughters as my wife. Seven hells, Tyrion even suggested Cersei Lannister should be on my list of potential brides. I’m not planning on marrying anyone until this war is won though.”

Sansa almost wished Jon was gone again. She hated being talked down to like this. Hated how he didn’t even seem to see that he should ask her for her opinion on things. “I’m supposed to be one of your advisors. I can’t advise you if you just make decisions without talking to anyone.”

“Like you made the decision not to tell me that the Knights of the Vale were riding in to support us? In your fight, no less, the one you begged me to take on for you.”

Sansa wasn’t surprised he was still angry about that, but they had already discussed this. “Do you have any idea what it cost me to call for his help? Do you know what it’s like to win a battle for someone and then watch everyone give the credit to the man sitting next to you just because he’s a man?”

“That’s not fair.”

“No it’s not.” Sansa could feel the tears rising but she pushed them down, clinging to cool anger instead. “Just like it wasn’t fair when we were kids and you and Robb got to play the heroes of the rebellion while I was always stuck being the captured princess. Lyanna Stark trapped in the Tower of Joy.”

“You’re misremembering that, Sansa. Theon got to be the hero beside Robb. The Robert Baratheon to his Ned Stark. I was usually stuck playing the villain, Rhaegar Targaryen.” Jon’s face strangely lost its color at the memory.

“Still it brought back a fond memory and Sansa softened. She said, “That’s right. Though you always liked the Targaryens, Jon.” Some things never changed, she thought, thinking of how Jon
looked at Daenerys. “I stopped hanging out with you guys because Theon kept trying to kiss me once I was rescued.”

Jon chuckled. “Oh yeah, that always pissed Robb off.”

“Not you?”

Jon’s head ducked. “No,” he admitted. “I would back Robb up, but I didn’t really care for you or Theon. Always thought the two of you deserved each other.”

They broke eye contact neither saying anything for a moment. Sansa wished she could just love Jon. She did love him. He was her brother and nothing would change that. She just wished he would rule the way she wanted him to. She was afraid of losing him, like she’d lost her father, her mother, Robb and Rickon.

Did that make her just as bad as Cersei? Trying to control every king she came across? She hoped not.

She opened her mouth to apologize but Jon spoke first, “How did Lady die? I never asked you.”

The tears were back. Sansa’s voice shook when she told Jon what had happened. His look softened at her tale, gently touching her face. “I’m so sorry, Sansa. I’m sorry for every bad thing that’s happened to you over the years. I wish I could have saved you from it. That anyone would have saved you.”

Sansa interrupted, “Brienne tried, but I didn’t let her.”

Jon continued, “I’m sorry for the bad things that happened to you. I can’t promise no more bad things will happen to you, but I won’t be one of them.” He took his hand away “I will decide for myself who I will marry.” Sansa tried to protest, but Jon held up a hand. He continued, “I promise you the same privilege.”

Sansa’s eyes searched his for the lie. “What?”

“I promise you that I will never marry you off to some lord because I need his men. You can marry whoever you choose. Marry some stable boy because he’s got a cute smile for all I care.”

Sansa launched her arms around her brother. “Thank you, Jon.”

Jon returned the hug. He whispered, “I can’t promise that I wouldn’t prefer you marry the lord over the stable boy though.”

Sansa chuckled and slowly let him go.

Jon looked like he wanted to say something else, but he just said, “Now I need to go figure out how to kill a dragon and bring back the sun.”

He paused before leaving though, “Sansa, I need to talk with you and Arya later. Perhaps a private dinner for the Starks could be arranged tonight?”

“About your mother?” Sansa guessed.

He nodded and left, leaving the details to her to sort out.
Tyrion poured a glass of their dwindling supply of Dornish red for him and his queen. They both would need a good drink after all of that.

Tyrion feared he’d run out of wine far before running out of situations that required a good drink to recover from them. Gods, why did the Martells have to die? He could have asked for an advance. Then again, he often wondered if their allies would have followed them to their war in the north. The Dornish might have been content to wait it out in their hard to conquer lands while the Queen of Thrones might have not cared since her house was gone and her not much longer for the world.

Yet, the queen still wanted to defend those lands. It would be admirable if it didn’t cause Tyrion yet another headache. He decided to approach the topic directly. “You’re going to have to summon the Second Sons. We’re going to need someone to fight off the Gold Company. A two front war means we need everything we got.”

The queen sighed, looking into her wine. “I know.” She took a sip, saying nothing more.

Tyrion braved what he knew could ignite the queen’s wrath and displeasure and said, “You cannot let personal feelings get in the way of what is needed, my queen.”

“You were the one who insisted I leave him behind,” Daenerys replied.

“That was then. You have your marriage alliance. Daario is no longer a threat to that.”

“Do I? As you pointed out, no one has proposed.”

“You think Jon Snow would let you marry another? Do you think he plans to marry another?”

“I don’t know what he thinks.” She sounded like a child, Tyrion thought.

“Have you even talked to him since he returned?”

“No. It’s for the best,” Daenerys said. “Too dangerous to appear as more than a military alliance. It’s how we should have been acting all along.”

Tyrion knew it was the right answer for a queen, but he thought he knew enough about the woman beneath the queen’s mask to know she was hurting. That this was more than an act. He also knew it would be for the best if the queen and king talked about what drove him away, but he didn’t know that it was his place to tell her this. The queen’s personal life was, of course, not personal since she was a queen, but he also knew how vulnerable love could make a person.

He knew his queen hated to show weakness, even to him. Tyrion made a mental note to approach Jon Snow about it instead, thinking it might go better. “I don’t know what’s happening between the two of you, and I know that Daario certainly isn’t going to help with it, but we need more men. He has them.”

Daenerys looked out the window to the burning fires keeping the courtyard alight, the criss-crossed shadows of bars appearing across her face. “Send for him and the Second Sons then.”

Tyrion nodded.

Daenerys turned to face him fully. “We need to speak about your brother.”
Jaime had only been in Winterfell once and his last visit hadn’t been a pleasant affair. He had even fewer fond memories of the queen who would soon be deciding his fate.

Jaime was uncomfortable looking at the Dragon Queen. She looked too much like her mother, Rhaella. It forced bad memories, hearing Rhaella’s screams as the mad king raped her and Jaime did nothing, seeing her afterwards as though she’d been mauled by a beast. He had been happy she’d escaped. Daenerys was a product of that awful night. How could Tyrion follow a woman born from such evil and misery? How could this queen be any better than her father had been?

Even Bonifer the Blessed had noticed the strong resemblance; he had been muttering something about Rhaella’s daughter when they left the royal presence.

The object of his thoughts entered, with his brother following. Neither face gave away much, but Jaime hoped his brother’s lack of a reaction meant good things for him.

“I’ve heard you called Kingslayer.” Daenerys turned to face him the hatred clear in her gaze. “Why shouldn’t I have you killed for your crimes against my family?”

Kingslayer. It always came back to that for him. “I may not have served your father in the way…”

“This isn’t about my father,” the queen interrupted. “My father was a mad dog and evil man. You put down a mad dog and removed an evil man from power. I will not fault you for that.” Jaime was stunned. How was it that only the mad king’s daughter seemed able to forgive him for that act? Even Ned Stark, a man who rebelled against the Mad King, had never forgiven him for what he’d done. “This is about the fact that not long ago, you charged at me with your spear. Why should I trust you?”

Jaime knew this would be an uphill battle. “Because the Warden of the North is right. That fight doesn’t matter anymore. You don’t have to trust me. Don’t have to think me honorable. Don’t have to like me. I came here to protect the realm. I am a knight. I will fight for the people of Westeros, as I always have.”

Daenerys looked to Tyrion. Jaime never would have guessed his life would ever so fully land in his little brother’s hands. They said nothing to each other, but Jaime suspected they could communicate through looks as they seemed to have a conversation all the same. The queen turned away, sighing. She glared at Jaime again before speaking, “I will allow you and your men to fight with us. If you fight for us and survive the war, you will not join my Kingsguard. Not after what you did to my father. I allow you to return to Casterly Rock. You will remain there for the rest of your days, seeing to your lands and your people. You will take no wife and father no children.”

Jaime snorted, “Shall I wear a black cloak as well?”

“That would also be an acceptable solution. The Rock or the Wall. I will allow you that choice, Ser Lannister.” She stepped towards him, and Jaime fought the urge to step back. “You will raise no army. You will never fight against me again.” She looked at his golden hand. “If you ever raise a hand against me again, you will have no hands left. Do I make myself clear?”

Jaime nodded. Daenerys stepped in even closer, her voice a soft growl, “I need to hear you say it.”

Jaime’s jaw clenched, but he forced out the words. “Yes, your grace.”

She nodded, stepping away again. “You will be commanded by Jon Snow. You and your men can find weapons in the forge.”
Without another word, she left the brothers, her guards following her out, leaving them alone. Jaime let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding.

Tyrion looked after the queen before speaking, “I think that went very well.”

“Do you?” Jaime wasn’t sure if his brother was joking.

“Yes. She didn’t have you beheaded or burned alive. I think this was the best outcome we could have hoped for.”

Jaime was sure his brother was right, but he still felt like he may have just paid too steep a price. “Why would she allow me to return home? Cersei would never allow such a thing.”

“Daenerys is not Cersei, thank the gods. And in case you missed it, you were just placed under house arrest indefinitely.”

Jaime changed the subject, “Why am I reporting to Jon Snow?”

Tyrion replied, “Our queen has made him her commander of our armies. He’s planning the troop movements and leading the fight. It was a wise choice. He knows the most about these wights and knows more about battle command than I do. As you proved earlier this year.”

Jaime had missed most of what his little brother had said, focusing on “Our queen.” A small smile came to Jaime’s lips. Despite everything that had happened it was nice to be on his brother’s side once again. Jaime said, “Cersei was convinced the Dragon Queen seduced the King in the North into submission.”

Tyrion frowned. “No.” Tyrion studied his brother, as if debating whether or not he should say anymore. If he should trust him. Such a look would hurt Jaime if not for the fact he knew he deserved it. “That happened independently of politics.”

Jaime’s eyes widened. He had thought that to be more of his sister’s paranoia. Bending the knee was the only option Jon Snow had really had. The North couldn’t hope to fight her forces any better than his own army had. And with the threat of the Night King and his army, the King in the North had needed allies desperately.

Tyrion snorted, fetching himself a glass of wine and pouring one for Jaime as well. “They hid it even worse than you and our dear sister did. I only hope they can keep it hidden a little longer.” He handed his brother the glass.

Jaime drank it down quicker than usual. His siblings were the drinkers, he didn’t partake as much. They sat, drinking in silence for a moment. Then Tyrion asked, “What of the child?”

Jaime finished his drink. “I had been hoping it would be the first one I could have been a father to. A real father. I was shit with the other three. Myrcella…” Jaime closed his eyes at the horrid memory. He hadn’t even tried to stop Cersei on that piece of revenge. Their sweet daughter hadn’t deserved such a brutal ending. “…she died in my arms right after I told her the truth. Just like Joffrey.”

Tyrion fetched the bottle, filling their glasses again, setting the bottle nearby. “I was sorry to hear it. Her and Tomenn, they were sweet children. They didn’t deserve to be crushed by the game of thrones.”

“No, they didn’t.” Jaime thought about it often. How different life might have turned out for his children if they had been lords and a lady rather than princes and a princess. Even Joffrey might
have tempered better with less power in his reach.

Tyrion took a drink, but left the wine in his mouth a bit before swallowing. “I haven’t told the queen about Cersei’s child yet.”

Jaime’s head whipped to his brother. “Why?”

“I’m not sure. I think it’s because I’m not sure what to advise her about it yet. I want to tell her that the child is innocent and doesn’t deserve its mother’s fate.” He sighed. “But then our father’s pragmatism kicks in and I know it wouldn’t be smart to keep a potential heir to the throne around for her detractors to gather behind. I think I’m just hoping to wait until after the baby has been born. We’ll be busy after all.”

“Why wait?”

“She’s not a monster. Daenerys won’t want to kill a baby. Even if I advised her to do it, she might still refuse. She’s not Robert, she doesn’t have an irrational hatred for all Lannisters. Her hatred for our family is completely rational. The harder sell will be asking her to wait to kill our sister. While that child is in her belly, it is in danger.”

Jaime knew his brother was right, if just because it was his brother and he often was right. “Even harder than that will be Cersei waiting. You know she’s going to attack Daenerys and the north as soon as she gets her army.”

Tyrion finished his drink. “She would be that stupid. She’ll think that the two front war will weaken us, which it would, and she’ll destroy us. She might even succeed, but then she’ll face the Night King alone. How does she not see that?”

Jaime took a drink. It was the very thing that made him finally walk away from the woman he loved. She couldn’t see real threats anymore, too busy chasing after imaginary ones. But something clicked in his mind thinking about the Gold Company marching up behind their army. “What do you remember about what father said about the Golden Company?”

Tyrion paused his pouring a fresh glass of wine, he looked confused at the question, but answered, “They are a sellsword army of exiles, one of the best. They ride elephants into battle.” Tyrion paused at the thought of the Night King somehow getting elephants to join his army. “They have never broken a contract and have a proud history fighting Targaryens even though they were founded by a Targaryen bastard. Why?”

“How much gold does the queen have? If they join our fight…”

Tyrion looked skeptical. “If they have a contract with Cersei, they won’t break it to help us fight.”

“Do they? She’s sending for them, but I don’t know that she’s actually signed anything.”

Tyrion considered it for a moment. “It’s a risk. If she has a contract with them, they’ll kill any embassy we send.”

Jaime looked out the window, which overlooked children being trained to fight. “I think we’re desperate enough for such a risk.”
Ser Davos sometimes wondered what he was still doing here, acting as Hand to a man who was no longer a king. He was no fighter, a self-confessed coward who knew about smuggling and little else. He should be making his way home to see his wife and children at least one more time.

But he stayed. He stayed in this room surrounded by fancier folk than himself, from better families with better names than his own - Lannisters, a Targaryen and Starks. He never would have guessed this is where his life would have led him.

It had all happened because he’d become friends with Stannis Baratheon and took a liking to a young lord commander on the Wall.

Davos sat next to Jon now, on the side of the former king’s very small council. Only his sisters and his friend, Samwell Tarly, sat on the lord’s side. The queen had her Hand, her spymaster, her scribe, her Unsullied commander, a fallen knight, and three Dothraki bloodriders.

Davos wasn’t sure where Jaime Lannister and his sellsword fit in, and clearly the knight didn’t either, as he sat on neither side, staying standing instead. The sellsword sat directly across from the queen, putting his feet up on table in a far too casual manner. The sight made Davos smirk. Sometimes he missed the manners of lowborn men. Men who acted as they pleased rather than how they’d been trained to act since childhood.

Davos was growing weary of nobles, and their manners, their games. He missed home. He missed the simple life he’d carved out for himself.

But life wasn’t simple right now. The Long Night was here and the dead were coming. This is where the fight was. This is where he had to be.

Still, sometimes he thought about asking for a boat and sailing home. He knew that Jon would allow it, the boy would probably encourage it if Davos ever brought it up.

But Jon needed him here. He needed someone with a clear head and an outsider’s view. Someone who wouldn’t get caught up with their own baggage or family name and give him the solid advice he needed to win this fight for them all. Maybe Davos was fooling himself by thinking he was that man, but he would stay until the fight was over or he was ordered to leave and no sooner.

Gods, he thought, maybe he was becoming some bloody brave hero that he never was and never thought he would be.

Lord Tyrion was spelling out a plan to his queen, one concocted by the dwarf and his brother, to try and gain their own contract with the Gold Company, undermining Cersei and taking away her army before she even has it.

The queen listened to the plan carefully and Davos looked to the man who’d been his king. Jon’s eyes were focusing on the queen, which was usual for the man. They had been fighting since he’d returned, Davos knew. He’d already told Jon to fix the problem, but as far as he could tell nothing had been done.

“We can’t afford you two having a lover’s spat. We need you both working together in this fight, setting the example as leaders.”

“We’re not having a lover’s spat,” Jon had told him.

“Beggin’ your pardon, but bullshit, your grace.” Davos had put a hand on Jon’s shoulder at that point. “As a man married for damn near 40 years that woman is pissed at you. Your best bet is to go talk to her, find out why and fix it. I’ll give you a hint - she’s probably mad about the fact that
you brought her to your home then immediately left her with a bunch of people who don’t like her and without warning.”

Jon had sighed. “I can’t. I can’t talk to her just yet, Davos.”

Looking at the way she was purposefully ignored him and how his longing had returned, Davos knew the two had yet to work anything out. Stupid boy, Davos thought. Stretching it out just makes the fight worse when it finally happens.

He focused back in on what was actually happening. The plan of buying the Gold Company. The queen folded her hands, considering what Lord Lannister told her. Daenerys said, “I’ve met them once before. My brother invited them for a feast. They ate his food, heard his pleas for help, and laughed in his face. He never forgave them for it and the whole event made him much crueler. Bittersteel, indeed.”

Jaime moved to say something more, but Tyrion silenced him with a look. Davos watched with interest. He’d noticed the way the little man handled his monarch, giving her time to think things through, arguing with perfect logic. It was different than how Davos advised Jon, but then the queen wasn’t Jon, their temperaments were similar, but still different.

She looked to Jon Snow, who had said nothing yet. “What do you think?”

He glanced at her for a moment and Davos recognized the look of anguish on his face. Davos wanted to yell at the young warden that Jon could end his problems with one long talk. Stupid boy, he thought again. Being around young people was turning Davos into a bitter old man, why did they all insist on making mistakes they could avoid by listening to their elders? “We could use all the men we can get in our fight, and we don’t need a second front.”

Daenerys turned to Tyrion. “How would we pay for them?”

Tyrion looked annoyed by the question. “We may be able to get a loan from the Iron Bank.”

Daenerys shook her head. “I don’t want to be in debt with them without a clear way of paying them back. Winter is here, our resources are already stretched thin. And from what you tell me, the crown I plan to win is already in debt to them.”

“Yes, but they…”

“I spent time in Braavos. I know how they handle debtors.” Her eyes shifted to Arya Stark, sitting in the corner.

Tyrion sighed, and then his eyes connected with Sansa Stark’s, “Maybe you should have held off on killing Littlefinger.”

The look she gave him was as cold as the winter.

Davos spoke up, looking at Grey Worm, “What about the Unsullied? How did you pay for them?”

Daenerys replied. “I didn’t. I told their masters that I would trade a dragon for them. Then I killed all of the masters, freed the Unsullied and now they follow me because they choose to.”

Davos was taken aback by the story and a quick look around the room told him that he wasn’t alone. The sellsword had even thrown he feet off the table, looking at the queen with open mouthed shock. Davos had know that Daenerys had liberated the Unsullied and they followed her because they loved her for that. He’d never heard the full story. Daenerys continued, “I don’t think
that would work on an army of sellswords."

“No,” Tyrion agreed. He looked over to Bronn, another sellsword. “Do you have any ideas?”

Bonn shrugged. “Find some more gold.”

Tyrion grumbled, “I could have thought of that.”

Sansa spoke up, “Is there anything else they could want?”

“What do you mean?” Tyrion asked.

“The company is primarily made up of Westeros exiles. Would they want to be pardoned? Welcomed back to their home country.”

They all considered it, but Tyrion shook his head. “Even if a few of them would go for it, no way we could get the entire army with such a plan.”

“Even better,” she replied. “Split them, get them infighting, weaken them. A weak army is easier to destroy.”

The words were surprising from the usually proper young lady of Winterfell. Tyrion gave a half-snort. “You really will survive us all, Lady Stark.”

Jon Snow asked, “Just how much time did you spend with Littlefinger?”

She looked over to him, “Enough to learn.”

Jon didn’t look pleased. Daenerys was looking at Tyrion again, “Who do we send as an envoy? It has to be someone important enough for them to listen, but…” she paused before finishing, search for better words but finding none. So she changed her words, “…and skilled at negotiations.”

Davos understood what the queen had meant to say. The envoy might be killed on sight and needed to be someone expendable.

Jorah never missed a chance to serve his queen. He said, “I will go, your grace.”

Daenerys’ look softened and she said gently, “You’re more useful here. You’re a better knight than a negotiator.”

Davos watched the exchange and looked over to the former king once more. Everyone could see that the old bear was smitten with the dragon queen. Jon didn’t seem to be bothered, but Davos could see that younger man’s jaw was tighter than it had been.

Davos shook his head. Youth was wasted on the young.

Sometimes wished she could be like Bran, see everything, know everything. As skilled as she was now, she could only be in one place at once. But she had two men to follow, to watch. Arya didn’t want to let Jon out of her sight, still afraid he might run again. From what, she still wasn’t sure, but Jon was different now. He would always be her most beloved brother, would always stand by her, she knew, but he was a leader now too. He concerned himself with politics and wars and greater
threats.

And dragon queens.

It had not escaped Arya’s attention that Jon’s eyes always seemed drawn to the queen when she wasn’t looking and her to him. Arya knew what it meant, but she wanted to hear it from Jon. Wanted to be sure that this queen could be trusted with what was most precious to her, her beloved brother.

Arya wasn’t sure anyone would ever be good enough for Jon, but a dragonriding queen like the hero she’d worshipped as a child, might be. Daenerys seemed like a genuine hero, Arya had sensed no lie from her; Arya had been proud to follow her into battle. Though she feared that the queen would take Jon away from her, from his family, make him join her in King’s Landing. Jon was not meant for King’s Landing. King’s Landing was for snakes and schemers and not for honorable men like Jon.

Like their father.

No. That would not happen. Not again. Not ever. Jon would live. Arya was no stupid little girl now. She would protect Jon, at all costs, even from himself if needed.

But Jon wasn’t the only man who Arya needed to watch. The Kingslayer was here as well. Cersei’s twin and lover. The evil man who’d thrown Bran from a window during his last visit here. Arya watched him with interest.

She had thought she had given up on her mission to kill Cersei, but it was so close now. She watched the pretty kingsguard talk with one of his men, not a care in the world. She could get close to Cersei, could slit the evil queen’s throat before she could start her newest plot to destroy Arya’s family.

She just needed his face.

Daenerys looked out over the training field, seeing her own men mixed in with Westerosi. It warmed her hurt to see even though she knew there was still tension there. The knights of Westeros didn’t think foreign savages could teach them anything and the Dothraki spurned the idea of armor and broadswords. Their fighting style was based around speed, the Westerosi on strength. While she didn’t want or expect them to drastically change their fighting styles, she did want them to learn from each other and become one army. Jon had suggested pairing different cultures for sparring so that they would organically learn these differences and possibly improve their own skills.

She had missed that part of him, the strategic warrior. Jon better understood fighting and the way fighting men thought. He was better at seeing details she might miss, as Daenerys was more focused on the big picture. They were a good team, better together, and even though Jon was back, she still didn’t feel like they were together. She still missed him.

She knew they needed to talk, really talk. She knew it and despite the fact that both of them were usually people to face things head on, they both avoided the discussion. Daenerys only knew her own reasons for it. She was afraid he would break her heart. She couldn’t afford such a thing right now. She needed to be a clear-headed ruler, not some silly girl crying over a boy. She feared her own weakness so much.
It was better to pretend. It was better to keep Jon at a distance than bring him close again, only for him to destroy her once more, fully this time. It had hurt so much, for him to leave her, for her to fear for him without even knowing why he’d left in the first place.

But she didn’t want him to stay away. She wanted Jon. She felt as though she had been looking for the man her entire life, and she refused to let him go without a fight. She didn’t fully believe in destiny, but their love felt like fate.

Daenerys wasn’t sure how to deal with these conflicting emotions. So she just ignored them, put them aside to focus on the war.

A knight approached her, one she recognized as the Lannister man who’d stared at her. Bonifer the Blessed or Good, Daenerys remembered Tyrion named him. She waved her guards off from their alertness. A true assassin wouldn’t approach her with caution like this man did.

He still stared at her. It was unsettling because it was not the usual lustful or hateful stares men often gave her. He looked at her like she was a ghost. A phantom he wasn’t quite sure was real.

Then he did something that unnerved her further. He knelt before her, bowing his head. “My queen,” he said.

Daenerys had fought and struggled for everything she had, so this blind loyalty from a stranger wasn’t something she was familiar with. She shifted uncomfortably, before she said, “You may rise.”

He obeyed, still playing the part of a good knight. Despite knowing the answer already, Daenerys asked, “Who are you?”

“I’m Ser Bonifer Hasty, commander of the Holy Hundred. I…I knew your mother, your grace.”

Daenerys’ eyes widened and her curiosity burst forth. “You did? What was she like?” Daenerys had so many questions. Ser Barristan had only said that Rhaella had been a good and honorable queen who did her duty. She longed to know of the woman behind the queen. She longed to know the mother whose ring never left her finger.

She played with the curled dragon absently, remembering how Viserys had warned her they would have to sell it too if their mother’s crown didn’t fetch a good enough price. It was the start of his cruelty towards her. Almost like her brother couldn’t love her anymore once he returned sans the last piece of the mother he dearly loved. He had never talked about Rhaella either, except to tell Daenerys that she wasn’t worth the death of their mother.

Bonifer the Good answered, “Rhaella was…” He ducked his head. “I had to follow the maid to come close to finding her equal.”

The maid, Daenerys thought. Strange to hear this man compare her mother to the young virgin goddess when Daenerys’ very existence should have made him think of the mother instead. Though Daenerys was still learning when it came to the Light of the Seven. But then this man had clearly known her mother in her younger years, before she was Daenerys’ mother, before she was anyone’s mother.

Daenerys remembered a story she’d heard about her mother and father. How they had both loved others but wed each other under their father’s command, fulfilling their royal duty. Aerys had loved Joanna Lannister, which had driven a wedge between the king and his Hand. Rhaella had loved some no name knight.
Bonifer Hasty was some no name knight. Daenerys’ eyes closed. Her mother had followed her duty rather than her love and before her now stood the man her mother might have loved. Daenerys looked at the man again, more critically this time.

He wasn’t dashing, but perhaps he had been in his youth. He looked stern and withered now though his eyes were a honeyed brown that Daenerys could imagine being capturing.

“Ser Barristan once told me that my mother loved a knight from a lesser house. He never gave me a name though.”

“Wise man. No good would come from such knowledge, not for the knight or the queen and her family.” Daenerys meant to speak but he cut her off. “There was a prophecy that a hero would emerge from the family line of Aerys and Rhaella. One that would bring the dawn.”

Daenerys shook her head, thinking of her brother’s obsession with prophecies. “My family chased after many prophecies, and it destroyed them.”

“Did it? Here we face the enemy of an age, with a hero of one.” He lowered his voice, “I doubt a daughter of mine would have ever raised dragons, no matter how much she was loved.”

“Perhaps your daughter would have chosen love over dragons, if given the choice.” Daenerys looked out onto the courtyard to see snow falling in the patches of light around the lit torches. She loved her children dearly, but if she could, would she give them up for a happy mother and a loving father? Would she sacrifice them for the happy life that was never hers?

No. She grew strong because of them. Her life had been a hard one, but it had led her to this moment, this fight. She wouldn’t trade that, not for anything. But part of her wanted to. She’d desperately wanted a family, love, her entire life. It was not a desire that left easily.

And had she not already sacrificed one of her children for love? She had paid Viserion for Jon, a decision she couldn’t regret though part of her knew that Tyron had been right, especially now that they knew the meeting with Cersei had failed after all. She feared what else she might have to give in the future for her love for Jon. She wished she could stay mad at him, continue to act cool around him, but she was breaking on that front. She had longed for love for so long; how could she willingly throw it away now that she had found it?

She wanted to run to Jon in that moment and beg for his forgiveness for her recent actions and forgive him his, to make love to him until they couldn’t move. She wanted him so badly.

But she would not. She had to be strong. She could not let love get in the way of being a queen. Her eldest brother had made that mistake and their family was still paying for it. She would not repeat it. She would follow the example of her mother instead, doing her duty no matter how much it cost her. She was the last dragon, she could not fail.

She only feared that such a convection wouldn’t last the moment she looked into Jon Snow’s beautiful gray eyes.

Sansa had arranged the dinner as requested. She had even managed to pull Bran from his tree and his visions and Arya from wherever she went off to these days. Jon didn’t look happy to be with his family, but he thanked her anyway.
Something was off with him, had been since he’d gotten back. He’d been so focused before, but now it was like he’d lost himself along with that single-minded focus, like he had too many thoughts now.

He ate but without his usual appetite. Arya seemed to pick up on the mood as well, picking at her food rather than consuming it as well. Bran didn’t seem interested in food either, but he didn’t seem interested in anything but that damned tree nowadays anyway. Sansa worried about what it meant.

She tried to make small talk but only Jon even tried to engage with her, and Jon and small talk had never gone well together. After several awkward minutes of silence, Bran said, “Jon, just tell them.”

Jon’s head snapped up and he stared at Bran as if he’d struck him. Jon swallowed the rest of his ale. Then he sighed and the words spilled out, “Lyanna Stark was my mother. She made Ned Stark promise to protect me, which he did by claiming me as his bastard son. I was really Rhaegar Targaryen’s child. He didn’t kidnap Lyanna; he married her.”

There was no air in the room for a beat. Sansa, of course, realized the implications first. “That makes you king. You’re the rightful heir to the Iron Throne.”

“Sansa…” Jon warned, his tone tired.

“Your claim is better than Daenerys’ if you’re Rhaegar’s trueborn son.” Sansa whitened. “Jon, you may not be safe here. Not if she knows.”

Jon shook his head. “I don’t want the Iron Throne. I won’t challenge her.”

“But Jon,” Sansa’s hand took his arm. “It’s your birthright.”

Jon shook his head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does.” Sansa looked at Jon with new eyes. He wasn’t Ned Stark’s bastard, he was...he was the most important man in the Seven Kingdoms, and he always had been. She had been so wrong about him, her mother...how would have Catelyn Stark handled this truth? So many questions swirled in Sansa’s mind, but one fact remained. “People will fight for you, Jon.”

“Sansa, I know that Bran isn’t lying. You know it.” He looked at their brother who barely reacted to anything they were doing. “He has no reason to. But who else will see it that way? The secret Targaryen prince, hidden away in the north all this time – the bastard made king, it’s too fantastical. No one would believe it.”

“The common people love stories like that,” Arya pointed out.

“And they have one. The Targaryen Queen who brought the dragons back and will save them from the undead horde.” Jon shook his head again.

Sansa’s brow furrowed for a moment before she said. “You mentioned marrying Daenerys this afternoon, but she’s your…”

Jon closed himself off. “It’s a still good move politically, especially in light of…everything.”

“But doesn’t that make her your aunt?” Arya asked.

Jon shrugged again. “If I’m a Targaryen, it doesn’t matter.”
Sansa and Arya exchanged a look. Arya’s chin jutted out as she declared, “You’re right it doesn’t matter.” She walked over and hugged Jon. “You’re still my brother. I don’t care what your true name is. Names change as easily as faces.”

Sansa joined them, hugging them both, understanding all the problems this will cause but she reassured him. “You are our brother.”

They held each other for a moment, a family. Sansa noticed Bran off, separate from him and wheeled him over to hug him as well. He seemed surprised at the contact, seemed confused by the affection. Sansa tried to ignore it, even though it reminded her of how much had changed.

Bran was some kind of mystic, Arya was an assassin, and now Jon was a Targaryen. Part of Sansa hated the massive changes, but their pack was strong. They were strong. This family would not break, would not die easily. Sansa couldn’t afford to lose anymore family.

Sansa grasped onto that feeling and held her family tighter.

After awhile, Jon pulled away. He cleared his throat, discretely wiping at his eyes. Sansa nearly smirked at the sight. Their father had the same habit when he was trying not to show his tears. It only confirmed what she already knew. No matter his blood, Jon Snow, Jon Targaryen was Ned Stark’s son.

Her mind pulled her back from her family, from the emotion and began to think of the larger political implications about the truth of Jon’s birth. She said, “You should hold off on telling Daenerys, at least until the war is won.” They could sort it out afterwards.

“No,” Jon responded, firmly, using the voice Sansa was beginning to think of as Jon’s king tone. Arya, surprisingly, agreed with her sister. “Sansa’s right. We can’t afford the possible split that could come from such a revelation. We’re barely fighting together as it is, this would just make it worse.”

Jon repeated, “No. I’m telling her.”

Sansa sighed, frustrated, “We need allies to win this fight. Desperately. We can’t afford a fight with her. Especially since we may have to still face Cersei’s army in the south.”

“She won’t abandon us. She gave her word.”

“You don’t know that. Your claim is better than hers. You are a threat. She could either kill you off to ensure her claim goes unchallenged or leave us to our fates and go back to her kingdom in Essos.”

“Sansa, she wouldn’t do that,” Jon repeated.

“How do you know that? Littlefinger told me what happened to her brother. She had her husband kill her brother to take the throne for herself. Why wouldn’t she do the same thing now?”

Jon paused. “That’s not what happened.”

“Are you certain of that? You don’t know anything about this woman.”

“I know her.”

“How, how could you know her?” Sansa blinked, understanding. “You’ve bedded her.”
Arya looked surprised, but Bran confirmed it. “Many times. Jon didn’t spend a single night alone on his return trip to Winterfell.”

Jon looked a little freaked out by Bran’s words. Sansa suppressed an eye roll, join the club, she thought. The club of your little brother knowing way too much about your sex life. Sansa continued, “You can’t sleep with your aunt, Jon.”

Jon licked his lips. “I didn’t know. Besides, Targaryens wed brother to sister. She’s not my sister.”

“Jon…” Sansa began.

“We didn’t know. Cousins marry, even Rickard and Lyarra Stark. It isn’t that different.”

Sansa let it go. “She may marry you, Jon, but she might kill you. You don’t know which way she’ll go.”

“She saved my life once already.”

“When she didn’t know you were a threat to her claim.”

“You could have had me killed in the Battle of the Bastards, Sansa. Taken Winterfell for your own. Been crowned Queen in the North. It would have been easy.”

Sansa looked offended at the suggestion. “I would never do that.”

“Why?”

“You’re my brother, I love you.”

“And you wouldn’t want to kill the last family you have left.” Sansa understood what Jon was getting at. “Why do you assume she’s a monster? She’s not Cersei, Sansa.”

Sansa quieted. It was true. Every royal, every ruler reminded her of the one who’d made the biggest impression on her. Cersei had shaped her in more ways than Sansa wanted to admit.

Arya asked, “Why haven’t you told her then?”

“What?” Jon asked.

“You would have told her first if you believed you had nothing to fear from her. If just to make sure she didn’t hear it from anyone else. Bran telling us wouldn’t have bothered you as much, but you wouldn’t have risked it for her.”

Jon quieted, as Arya studied him. “If you’re not afraid of her killing you then what does scare you?”

Sansa wished she could read Jon better, wished she had spent more time with him than she had. She might know his mind better now if she had. He answered carefully, “She’s been chasing that throne for years. How would you feel about someone coming along at the last second to stand in your way?”

“You just said she’s not going to kill you,” Sansa said, exasperated.

“No, she won’t kill me, but…” Jon stopped.

Arya finished for him. “But she might hate you.” Arya studied him. “You’re not just bedding her,
Sansa was reminded of those tragic love stories that made her cry as a girl. This seemed like one of those, a lost prince found again only to discover the woman he loved was actually his rival to the throne, and she felt sympathy for Jon. She placed a hand on his arm, “Jon...”

He took a step away from her, from all of them. “It’s not important. None of this is. We have a war to fight. I just...you deserved to know the truth of why I left. It won’t happen again. I know what I have to do.”

Sansa’s eyes met Arya’s. Both women desperately wanted to help their brother, but he clearly didn’t want it.

“I have to go,” Jon announced.

“We’re here for you if you need it, Jon.” Sansa’s eyes met his. “Always.”


Varys entered his chambers without a sound. Tyrion wasn’t surprised, spiders were always silent. The Hand was debating himself on the wiseness of getting truly shit-faced. It had been a while since he’d truly let loose with his drinking.

He was drinking as he debated himself, which he thought gave a good hint as to which way he would ultimately decide on. Part of him hoped that Bronn might seek him out, that it might be like old times.

Instead, he was speaking with Varys, which could be like old times too, but Tyrion was too used to the eunuch. He missed fun. Ten years ago, his biggest concern was possible venereal diseases he was getting from his whores. While he liked being Hand, enjoyed the challenges and using his mind, he sometimes missed the more carefree days.

Too much had happened. He finished his drink and poured another.

“Does the queen know how drunk you’re getting? You know she doesn’t like it.” Varys reminded Tyrion of a tattler. That was actually a good comparison, he thought. Varys was the kid who would be the first to tell and you knew it, but still invited him along for some reason.

“The queen is not my mother. She doesn’t check up on me,” Tyrion replied. Not that he really knew what mothers were like. The closest he’d ever had was aunts who didn’t despise him.

“The queen seems distracted these days. I wonder if she’s forgetting about the world she wanted to build.”

Tyrion snorted. “She is distracted, by the dead men waging war on us, which does in fact take precedence over her policies on poverty in King’s Landing.”

Varys’ eyes narrowed. “You know what I mean though. There will always be something. She’s getting lost in ruling, what if it continues?”

It was a valid worry, Tyrion knew. He worried about it too, the future, the queen’s lack of an heir
and her refusal to plan her succession. He remembered begging her not to go on that cliff in Dragonstone. They had lost a dragon, but they could have lost everything. And for what? Tyrion liked Jon but not enough to sacrifice the Seven Kingdoms for him.

He feared the queen no longer felt the same way. Had her feelings changed too much? Was she still the queen he’d willingly kneeled before in Essos, the one he was proud to serve? Or was she just another fool in love?

Tyrion set down the wine. These thoughts were just noise. He had a mission, issued by his queen. “We need someone to fetch the Second Sons, and possibly make a new contract with the Gold Company. You’re native to Essos and convincing.”

Varys kept an admirable stoic face, but Tyrion was sure he could see the fury through the cracks. “And I’m expendable.”

“Do you have little birds in the Night King’s army? You don’t seem to have any idea what’s happening with Cersei either. You aren’t needed in this fight.”

Varys looked away, jaw tensing and moving. “We’re putting our trust in that Stark boy and his magic, then.” He had spat out the word magic.

Tyrion wished he didn’t need to be the one having this conversation. He picked up his wine again. “It would be foolish not to.”

“So what are you asking me to do? What exactly is my objective?”

They were unnecessary questions, but Tyrion explained anyway, “Use your birds in Essos to see if the Gold Company would be open to another deal and gather as many of the sellswords we left behind to help us fight.”

Varys nodded, still looking angry, but he said nothing. Tyrion hoped that meant it was over and waited for the Spider to leave.

He didn’t. “What of our bet?”

“It still stands.”

“Then I’d like to use that favor now.”

“No.” Tyrion lifted his wine glass, pointing in the direction of the royals’ chambers, incredulous. “They’re fighting right now. Not even speaking. How does that prove that Jon Snow loves her more than Jorah Mormont?”

“You’ve seen how angry the queen got over Mormont’s betrayal. Jon Snow didn’t really betray her and yet she seemed even more upset with him. Why?”

“Her feelings don’t enter into it. The bet is about his feelings for her.”

“I believe you are mistaken. The King in the North isn’t the type to make a public spectacle of his feelings. But how do you think he will react when Daario gets here?”

Tyrion took a drink. He wasn’t sure how Daario and Jon Snow would act around each other. It could be coolly polite to cock measuring jealousy to pure hatred. He couldn’t imagine them getting along any better than Daario had gotten along with Mormont. He guessed it would be worse, as Daario would be the one on the outside looking in, so he’d gloat that he’d had the queen first,
which would piss Jon off. No matter how it played out, Tyrion wasn’t looking forward to
mediating it.

“Do you think Jon Snow will react better or worse than Jorah did to Daenerys’ lover?”

Tyrion regretted ever taking this bet. “Ex-lover,” he pointed out stubbornly.

Varys nodded, conceding. “I shall leave to serve our queen’s interests. I expect when I return, it
will be time to collect. The idea of gloating over you is motivation enough to ensure my living.”

Tyrion managed a sour smile at the thought.

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He knocked on her door. It was late. Too late he knew, but he didn’t care. He’d put this off for too
long. He should have demanded to see her that first night back. Daenerys opened it, but she looked
exhausted at the sight of him. “Jon, I know we have to talk, but it’s been a long day. Can we do this
tomorrow?”

In a split second, Jon decided on something he didn’t even realize he’d been debating. “I don’t
want to talk right now either. Tomorrow sounds good.” He held out a hand to her. “I want to show
you something.”

She looked at his hand wearily. A hint of desperation crept into Jon’s voice, “Daenerys, please.”

Her eyes softened and she took his hand, closing the door behind her. She muttered some orders in
Dothraki to her guards, leaving Jon and Daenerys to make their way through Winterfell alone. Jon
took the hidden passages he knew so well, the ones he’d learned to avoid the lady of the keep in
his youth.

He nearly laughed out loud at the thought of still using them even when he was the lord. He
gripped Daenerys’ hand a bit harder. Unlike Theon, even Robb on occasion, Jon had never snuck
around with a girl in Winterfell.

Then again, Daenerys Targaryen was no girl. She was the most amazing woman he’d ever met, and
truth be damned, he’d have her at least one more time before it all went to the seven hells. Gods
help him, just once more.

He could feel guilty about lying by omission tomorrow.

Jon mostly took her down, but the path he was taking could be confusing to someone who hadn’t
grown up exploring Winterfell. He could sense Daenerys’ confusion. When they got to an alcove,
she asked, “Where are we?”

Jon smirked. “I figured you’d have Winterfell completely mapped out by now.”

“It’s confusing. I’ve gotten lost a few times.”

He was surprised by the confession. “Really?” There was a laugh in his voice.

Daenerys looked annoyed. “Someday, I’m going to bring you back to Meereen, blindfold you, and
leave you somewhere in the great pyramid and then watch you figure a way out.”
Jon smiled. She couldn’t be too mad at him if she still saw him in her future. He tucked one of her curls behind her ear. “I won’t let you get lost in Winterfell anymore.”

He could see her walls shut down. “Jon,” she sighed. “What are we doing?”

He turned away, pulling her along with him. “We’ll be there soon. Just a little further.”

Jon wished the distance between them wasn’t there, but then, he was to blame for it. If he hadn’t run, like a coward, Daenerys wouldn’t have been hurt and she wouldn’t be shutting him out now.

No, she just might hate him for stealing her birthright.

He put the thoughts aside. He wanted one night. Just one, where they could put all the rest of it aside. He warned her about the tight squeeze as he carefully led her through a small tunnel. But he knew it would be worth it.

When the tunnel opened to a room of hot springs, he heard the gasp from Daenerys. He smiled at the sight of her awed face.

The hot springs of Winterfell, which heated the castle and could make even a winter day feel like summer. He knew she’d love them, even if he always thought this space a bit too warm. Most everyone did, which was how he knew they would have privacy. Few knew how to get here and most who did had no desire for the heat.

Daenerys shed her fur, a white lion’s skin that Jon always wondered about. He asked, “Where did you get that?”

Distracted, she mumbled, “Hmm?” She noticed his gaze on her fallen fur and nodded. “It was a gift.” She hesitated before answering, “From my first husband. It got cold in the desert at night. I hate the cold.”

Jon knew that. It was why he thought she would like it down here. The springs themselves and the greenhouse were the two warmest places at Winterfell. He’d always planned to bring her here. He just had expected it to happen much sooner.

She walked around, stopping by one of the springs. She moved to reach her hand in to touch the water, but Jon leapt forward, catching her arm to stop her. “Don’t. The water is scalding.”

She smiled at him, the way a mother did when a child spoke nonsense, but she didn’t move her arm away. Instead, she looked into his eyes. “This is wonderful, Jon. Thank you for bringing me here.”

Jon wished he could believe she meant Winterfell, but Tyrion had told him about her struggles with the lords and ladies during his absence. He should have been here, at her side. He’d been such a fool. But he didn’t know how to say any of that to her without spilling the truth about everything.

The silence stretched between them. Jon knew it grew awkward, and he missed the comfortable silence they’d shared on their journey here. How did they get back to that?

“You know, there’s a legend that a dragon lives under Winterfell, warming the springs.”

“Really?” Daenerys hugged her knees to her chest, watching the steam rise from the spring. “Maybe we should start digging. Wake it up.”

“It?” Jon was surprised by the impersonal pronoun from the mother of dragons.
“Dragons don’t actually have genders. I think of mines as my sons, but perhaps the Winterfell dragon is different. Maybe it’s an it or a she.”

Jon knew that dragons were genderless. But spending time with Daenerys had shifted his thinking about dragons, he thought of them now not as mindless beasts or intelligent monsters. All the legends about dragons and their riders he’d consumed greedily as a child paled in comparison to the truth of her and her children. Jon had been completely unprepared for her.

Almost as unprepared as he had been for the truth and his own heritage.

He put that aside. He stood instead, holding out a hand. “Come with me.”

Curious, she took it and he helped her up. Then he took her deeper into the cavern. Jon hadn’t spent much time down here, preferring the godswood to hide out in. But he’d been down here once as a boy, with Robb. Jon had been determined to find the dragon of legend and dragged his brother along.

Robb had gotten bored and overheated, but Jon refused to give up. He’d ended up passing out, and his father, Ned, had to come down and rescue him. When he woke up, dehydrated, he’d received a lecture about the dangers of the springs and their warmth.

But he had found something. He walked a bit faster, glad he’d dressed lightly despite how cold he’d been during the walk to Daenerys’ chambers. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Daenerys unbuttoning her thick dress. He tried not to notice how the thin undergarment stuck to her sweaty skin.

Jon stopped in front of a smooth wall that bulged out. He leaned over and whispered to Daenerys, “When I was a boy, I thought this was the dragon’s eyelid. That it was sleeping.”

Daenery reached out to touch the wall, which Jon remembered had been warm to the touch. Almost like a dragon, he thought, now that he had something to compare it to. Though Drogon’s scales had exuded heat, while the stone wall merely reflected the heat of the springs.

Still, it seemed to fascinate Daenerys. Jon stared at her unabashedly. He’d tried to limit his staring back in Dragonstone, but there was no reason to now. He wanted to memorize her face. Remember every line, every curve, everything that was Dany. He knew from painful experience how easily faces blurred in memory: Ygritte, Robb, even his father’s image grew fuzzy in his mind as more time passed. But he refused to let that happen with Daenerys. He would never forget her face, her smile, her smell, he would remember everything.

When she looked to him again, she seemed unnerved by his intense look, but she didn’t shy away from him. Jon took a tentative step forward, giving her the option of stepping back, of breaking off. As much as he wanted this, she had to want it too.

She didn’t move. She didn’t stop him when he put his arms around her, setting down the torch he’d brought with, didn’t resist when he pulled in closer to him.

Jon, still moving slowly, bent his head to capture her lips.

The soft touch was like coming home. He’d missed her so much. More than even his family or Winterfell, though it didn’t seem possible to him. One hand went to her cheek to bring her in closer so he could kiss her more firmly.

It didn’t take much for him to lose control. Didn’t take much for him to probe his tongue between her lips and devour her. He wanted to lose himself in her. Wanted to forget everything - the war, his
birth parents, the lie that had been his life - wanted it to just be him and her. He let the rest of the
world fade away. It was just him and her together. Her body soft and willing beneath his hands.

Maybe they could stay down here forever.

But Daenerys pulled back from his kiss, “I’m mad at you.”

“Punish me then,” Jon was lost. Too lost to come back now. “I don’t care. Please, Dany.”

She pushed some of his black curls from his face. “Jon,” she said as her eyes studied his. “What’s
wrong? Why are we here? Why did you leave? Why won’t you talk about it? Please, Jon.”

She was so lovely. Even now, her concern was for him, even though she had reason to hate him,
every reason to refuse him. He kissed her again, afraid he might cry and ruin the moment. “I
missed you,” he said. “I can’t do this anymore. I need you.”

Daenerys’ eyes shone. “I need you too,” she said so softly he almost didn’t hear it.

He kissed her again, even more desperately this time.

“I’m still mad,” she gasped out between kisses.

“I know,” and he did. She had every right to be mad at him. But he also knows it will be worse
when she knows the full truth. This may be the last night they spend together.

He will let the guilt eat away at him later. He planned on having her tonight. His hands went
beneath her wool dress to her silk undergarment. Gods, how he’d missed the feel of her rich
fabrics. Sheer wisps that covered only enough to tease a man to madness. He licked the side of her
neck, relishing the sound of her moan. Her fingers clenched in his hair, tugging on his curls, just
enough to hurt.

Good, he thought. He wanted it to hurt tonight. He wanted her to remind him how to feel alive. He
wanted some pain mixed with his pleasure to heighten the experience. He’d been with Daenerys
enough to know she liked it a little rough. It had taken him some time, but he found that he liked it
too.

His teeth captured some of her skin and she hissed at the sensation. “Jon.”

He loved hearing his name drop from her lips. He would hear her scream it tonight. He licked the
red marks he’d caused. One hand grabbed her ass and he ground her against him.

She moaned at the feel of him, which only increased his fever. He went back to her lips, kissing her
again, licking and biting.

One of her hands found its way under his shirt and he groaned when he felt her nails dig into his
back. He picked up one of her legs with his forearm as he slammed her against the “dragon’s eye.”
If there really was a dragon down here, they would wake the fucker up tonight.

As only dragons could.

He burned for her, his free hand tugged and ripped at the fabric that was in his way. The pesky
material covering her from his hungry gaze. Part of him knew that he should be more careful that
they would still need to make their way back through Winterfell’s halls and to her chambers again
later.
But a larger part of him didn’t care. Let them see, he thought fiercely. Let them all see whose she was. Let them know how well he fucks her. They all hated him for it anyway. His own lords despised him for his “foreign whore.” Probably because their own proper northern lady wives were too frigid to suck their dicks, Jon’s lust-filled mind supplied uncharitably.

Let them all know how much he loved fucking his aunt. He nearly barked out a laugh, but he repressed it, not wanting his lover to know his mad thoughts.

Daenerys was pulling his shirt up and without hesitation, Jon ripped it away. They were past the point when he got nervous about his scars. Daenerys licked and nipped at the hollow spot at the end of this throat, under his adam’s apple. She loved that spot, Jon had noticed. He threw his head back as he ground his hips into her, groaning loudly.

He doubted anyone would hear them down here, a fact he planned to use to their full advantage. He pushed her wool dress away, leaving her in silk. His eyes went to her breasts, her hardened nipples barely visible through the thin material. His mouth dove for them, not bothering to remove any more materials. She gasped at his teasing mouth and he sucked and lapped at one while pinching the other. When he pulled back he was pleased to find the wet material hid nothing and her pink bud was now fully exposed. He drank in the sight before repeating his treatment to the other breast.

Daenerys moved the skirt of her shift up to her hips, wrapping her legs fully around his hips, bringing him in tight. Her fingers tugged on the laces of his pants, but to remove them, he would have to step back and neither of them could bare any space between them at the moment.

When he finished with her breasts he stood up and pushing her legs wider, thrust against her. The contact made them both moan. Jon wasn’t sure why he was teasing them both, but he wasn’t thinking beyond what felt good at the moment.

He kissed her again, trying to slow down, but Daenerys wasn’t having it. She captured his bottom lip between her teeth and sucked. Jon could feel his eyes roll back and he trusted against her harder, slamming her into the stone wall.

Daenerys gasped and then she pulled him back by his hair, making him hiss. Her eyes looked down on him, “You’ve disappointed your queen, Lord Snow.” Fuck, he loved that cold queenly tone. The one he usually hated, but here and now was wonderful. She raised an eyebrow. “I expect you to make it up to me.”

Jon grinned. “Gladly.” He dropped to his knees to worship her. Daenerys helped him out, removing the rest of her clothes completely, leaving her completely nude now. He started at her feet, kissing every bit of skin he could find. Daenerys moaned, her hands back in his hair again. When he reached her inner thighs, he could hear begging. “Oh, Jon, please. Please.”

He wanted to tease her, wanted to drag it out. It always made it so much better. But he hadn’t tasted her in too long. He tried not to be, but he felt he would probably be selfish tonight.

She was so wet. He could nearly come at merely imagining being inside of her. His strong hand gripped her hips as he drank deeply of her. Daenerys cried out, riding his face and tongue. Jon didn’t mind. He kissed and licked and probed until she unraveled.

He waited for her to settle again, wiping his beard as clean as he could. He stood again, pushing his own clothes aside. He studied Daenerys, who appeared sated and pleased.
A random thought popped in Jon’s head that this woman looked like a female version of his father. He hated himself for thinking that right now. He hated himself more for it not being enough to stop him.

He distracted himself from his bad thoughts by kissing her again. Jon would never tire of kissing her. He had missed this, missed her so much. How had he gotten so addicted to her so quickly?

Jon licked her lips. He felt like a wolf, suspected he’d always be more wolf than dragon, no matter his name.

She was the last dragon.

He kissed her again, slowly guiding her away from the wall and down. She followed his lead, clasping to him like he was her lifeline. He clutched to her just as tightly, needing her just as much.

How had he ever thought he could give her up? Even if only for a moment. He would never, could never, stop this. They both wound out on their knees, his hands cupping her face.

Against her lips, Jon whispered, “Turn around.”

He’d been imagining it almost since he met her, but he saw a flare of vulnerability flash in Daenerys’ eyes. He kissed her once more. “I promise, we’ll stop if you don’t like it. Just tell me.”

Her eyes searched his before she nodded. “I trust you, Jon.”

Jon’s heart broke a little at that. She trusted him, and what was he doing with that trust? Lying by omission for one last night with her.

He pushed the thought down, guilt could wait until tomorrow.

He looked down at her, on her hands and knees before him, her ass in the air. She pushed her hair to one side looking at him over her shoulder, as if challenging him.

They should be doing this on a bed, he thought. The rocky floor was sure to be rough on her knees, and he wished for a pillow to put under her hips to make this easier on her. He grabbed his shirt instead, wishing he’d picked up her fur when they walked in. He folded it, doing his best to create a cushion for under her knees.

Daenerys smiled as he lifted her slightly to place the bunched shirt under her, “Always so considerate.”

He didn’t look at her, still unused to compliments and praise. His fingertips traced her spine. Even this part of her was beautiful. How was that even possible? His hands began to massage all of the skin on her back. He could hear his love breathing heavily, but steady, calming herself.

Jon’s lips followed his fingers as he kissed his way down her back. His hands cupped her hanging breasts as his cock teased at her entrance. He held her breasts, and gods, had they gotten bigger or was his memory of her corrupted by the weeks apart?

He used his knees to spread her legs wider, and he heard her moan in anticipation. He wanted to plunge into her right here and now, but he restrained himself. He wanted this to last, wanted her to come at least one more time.

He moved his hands again, one to brace her hip the other to tangle in her hair. He leaned over her fully, kissing her check and whispering into her ear, “Ready?”
She nodded and moaned, “Yes, Jon.”

He slammed home, his eyes squeezing shut against the feeling of her.

She howled at the force he took her with. He tugged on her hair, and she begged for more. Jon had never felt like this before. He’d loved and lusted, but this was something else. Something deeper than any emotion he’d ever felt. He didn’t want her; he needed her. He’d been brought back to life for her. Hells, he wasn’t sure he’d ever been alive before he’d met her.

His hips slammed into hers and his hand let go of her hair, dropping to a top her hand instead. His other hand, the one that gripped her waist went to her nub, rubbing furiously at it. He wanted to make him come, wanted to feel her walls clamp down and flutter on his dick.

“Fuck, Jon,” she cried out. It made him push harder. He’d never heard her swear before. It was the hottest fucking thing he’d ever heard. He wanted to hear it again. He would make the Dragon Queen, that cold woman sitting on her massive throne, completely lose control.

If it drove him mad with lust, so be it. The price was nothing compared to the reward.

He could barely hear the sounds slipping out of his own mouth. The words of praise, the curses and the grunts, they were drowned out by the beating of his heart, the sound of wet skin slapping against each other.

Daenerys screamed as she came and Jon’s fingers slowed to let her ride through her orgasm. When she finished he sped up, seeking his own satisfaction, finding it quickly. It pulled from the base of his spine and he emptied into her with a cry.

He collapsed beside her, careful not to crush her with his weight. She cuddled beside him, giving him time to catch his breath again.

Daenerys played with a strand of her hair. “I dreamed of you.”

Jon didn’t understand. “What?”

“My entire life I had a dream lover. I never could see his face well, just a shadow, until I met you. That first night after we met, I dreamed of my faceless lover, but for the first time his face focused and it was you. It was always you.”

Jon grew uncomfortable. “Maybe it was just a sex dreams.” The gods knew he’d had plenty of them on Dragonstone about her. His had started that first night as well. Jon was pretty sure he’d woken up with a hard on every morning on that island because of her.

“No.” Daenerys lifted herself to her elbow so that she could look at him. “I get visions of the future sometimes. They’re called dragon dreams and many think they’re just an extension of the Targaryen madness. They are so hard to understand until the events they predict happen. Yet they saved us all. They saved my family from the great Doom.”

Jon said nothing. The back of his knuckle tracing the curves of her body. He knew about dragon dreams of course. He’d read about them and Maester Aemon had talked about them. It was strange to learn that he’d been in one though. He didn’t really want to talk with her about this. He wanted to avoid the topic of Targaryens for tonight.

Daenerys seemed to pick up on his unease, switching topics, “What do you know about prophecies, Jon Snow?”
I know nothing, he thought. He said, “That they’re dangerous. They never quite turn out the way anyone guesses.”

“That’s true enough.” She played with his fingers. “I received one though. In the House of the Undying.”

Jon still thought prophecies dangerous, but he was still curious. So he asked, “What did it say?”

She recited it for him. “Three heads has the dragon. Three fires must you light: one for life and one for death and one to love. Three mounts you must ride: one to bed and one to dread and one to love. Three treasons will you know: once for blood and once for gold and once for love.”

Daenerys fingers played with his. She confessed, “I’ve always feared love a bit after being told that.”

She left the implication unsaid. She had ridden him more times than he could count, certainly making him one of her mounts. Daenerys had told him of the lover she’d taken in Essos after Drogo, one late night when they’d compared their past love lives. It was another foreign D name that he could not remember. The man who must have been the mount to bed. Drogon was another Black Dread, which only left one more mount.

Which meant that she thought he was the one to love. But was he going to betray her? Was he betraying her now, by not telling her the truth, would he betray her with the truth?

What was the third dragon head?

Jon refused to get lost trying to interpret some prophecy. It was a fool’s errand. He dismissed it. “You put too much value on the words of witches.”

“You were saved by a witch.” Her fingertips traced over the scar across his heart.

“Perhaps I should have died.” He had often thought it must have been a mistake, often wondered why he’d been saved when so many had fallen and stayed that way.

Daenerys forced him to look at her. “If you’d died, I might not be here now. I might still be fighting Cersei and ignoring the real enemy.” She kissed him slowly.

Jon could feel himself ready for a second time, but Daenerys pulled away.

She rested her head on his chest, her fingers entwined with his. “Who was she?”

“Who?” he asked. Daenerys was the only woman on his mind at the moment.

“You.”

No, Jon thought. I just want this for a moment longer. “Not tonight.”

Daenerys lifted herself again so Jon could see her frown, a crease formed between her brow. “I understand it upset you, and that’s fine. You’re allowed to feel upset but don’t just leave.” Her soft hand caressed his cheek. Jon closed his eyes and leaned into it. “I would be here for you, no matter what. So would your sisters, I think, even your brother. You have people here who love you, Jon. Don’t leave us in the dark.” She shivered at her words, and Jon wrapped his arms around her. He held her as tightly as he could. The eternal darkness was getting to all of them.

“I was afraid you’d hate me,” Jon confessed.
Daenery lifted her head to look at him again, a smile playing on her lips. “I could never hate you, Jon. Nothing you say could ever make me hate you.”

He wanted her to promise him that was true. “Are you sure about that? You’ve been acting like it since I got back.”

Her head went back to his chest. “I was just mad. It’s an easy emotion for me. The Targaryen temper. Runs in the blood. You’ll just have to get used to it, I’m afraid.”

He wanted to get used to it. He desperately wanted the chance to learn her flaws and how to deal with them. Jon thought of his own temper. It had always been worse than any of the other Starks. Maybe it really was just in the Targaryen blood. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry, Dany.”

She kissed him swiftly and sweetly. “It’s worth a lot, coming from you.”

He kissed the top of her head. “I promise I’ll tell you everything in the morning. I just want one more night.” One night where he wasn’t a threat to her. One night where he was still just Jon Snow with no hidden identity. One more night where his life wasn’t a lie and he still knew who he was. One night in the protective bubble that seemed to guard him and his love against the world, much like the one they basked in on that ship months ago.

Daenerys put her head back down on his chest and hugged him. “If that’s what you need, then that’s what you’ll have. I’m sorry too. I should have been more understanding, not shut you out.”

Jon could feel his heart ache. What good had he done to deserve her? What evil had he done to deserve having her only to lose her?

He had her tonight though. Jon bent down to kiss her again, more demanding now. He rolled her beneath him.

Jon wanted to feel every inch of her against him. He continued to kiss her, even as he prepared to thrust home. But Daenerys’ gripped his hips with her thighs and rolled them again, so that she could be on top.

She pulled away to sit up on him, but Jon followed her, continuing to kiss her. His arm wrapped around her, crushing her body to his. He felt needy and desperate, but Daenerys calmed him down, her hands gripping and massaging his shoulders until he settled down.

She whispered, “I’m right here, Jon. I’m here. I’m with you.” She kissed him. “I’m yours.”

Jon looked into Daenerys’ violet eyes. “And I’m yours,” he responded.

Daenerys stroked his length a couple of times, making him gasp. She lifted herself and slipped him in, grinding herself on him. Jon groaned, his arms coming around her like vices to hold her in place. He thrusted up into her a few times as she stayed put. When he hit that sweet spot in her, Daenerys threw her head back with a moan.

She then forced him to loosen his grip on her as she grasped his shoulders and began to ride him. It felt so good. Jon kissed her. It was nice to not worry about the noise they were making for once, but it had become habit to stop each other’s cries with their mouths, and Jon found he had no desire to break it.

Daenerys’ rhythm turned sloppy as she got lost in the pleasure. So Jon gripped her tightly again, rolling her over once more, and thrusting into her. Daenerys’ mouth broke away from his to cry
out. Jon adjusted his grip on her, forcing her knees wide and closer to her chest. He loved how flexible and strong his queen was. Jon set a brutal pace for them, one that would get them both to their ends fast.

He found his release first, but unwilling to leave Daenerys behind, his hand found her clit as her own hands played with her breasts, a sight that damn near made him come twice. She followed him soon after.

Jon was exhausted, but he refused to rest until he made his queen come at least one more time. He managed to get her to climax two more times and she wrung one more from him before they both decided that they were satisfied.

When they finally finished, Daenerys tucked herself into him, entangling her legs with his. One hand rested over his heart as her head rested on the other side of his chest. She whispered to him, “Jon Snow. The actual man of my dreams.”

Jon looked up even as he covered her hand with his. He may not have dreamed about her, but that was only because she was better than anything he would have been able to come up with. He listened to her breathing even out as she fell asleep. He wanted to weep, but refused to wake her for any reason.

I love you, he thought. Part of him wanted to say it out loud, but another part of him thought it might be deceitful to say something like that. To tell her that he loved her without telling her the truth of who he was. Even if she was sleeping and probably wouldn’t hear it. So he kept it a thought.

Don’t leave me, Jon thought. Everyone always left him. He had always been alone. Even with his family, with his brothers on the Wall, and within the wildings, he’d been kept separate from the group. A bastard, a lord commander, and a crow, never quite belonging. He cuddled closer to Daenerys, sniffing her silver blonde hair. He belonged with her.

The thoughts repeated in his mind as he felt sleep overtake him. I love you. Don’t leave me. I love you. Don’t leave me.

I love you.

Don’t leave me.

Marry me, was his final thought before drifting off.

There was too much to do and not enough time in a day. No one ever understood just how much work was required to be a ruler. They just saw the crowns and the power and lusted after the title. Robert certainly hadn’t understood, leaving his kingdom to be run by a council of traitors and fools. Neither Joffrey nor Tommen had understood what she’d tried to teach them. That the realm required a firm hand and a wise mind to guide it. A task she was well-suited for.

That bitch Margaery Tyrell and this so-called Dragon Queen certainly didn’t understand what the job of a ruler entailed. How much of yourself you had to give up for that power, what sacrifices had to be made. They were just girls playing dress-up.
Cersei Lannister knew though. Better than anyone. Even better than her own father, who had never quite reached for the heights she had. He had been just as foolish as every other man in her family in the end. Both her brothers, disappointments who were too stupid to understand everything their father had tried to teach them.

But she had listened; she had learned. She was the son Tywin Lannister should have had.

“Your Grace,” the representative of the Iron Bank said. “I understand that circumstances, have changed.” He pointed out the window to the darkened streets of King’s Landing. While the richer families were able to keep lamps lit and candles burning, the poorer sections had been in darkness since the sun had gone out. “But you cannot just change the terms of the loan.”

“I am queen, I can do whatever I want.” Cersei looked down on this little, nothing man.

The man’s eyes narrowed and he stood up. “The Iron Bank dictates its own terms, no matter who it’s dealing with. You would do well to remember our power, your grace.”

The newest member of the Queensguard, some no-name Tarly cousin who’d joined as result of their recent alliance, came in. “Your grace, we have found him.”

Cersei smirked. She dismissed the Iron Bank representative, who seemed sour at the simple wave off. But what did this little man with his balance books matter in the grand game? She would be the only player left soon, then he would have to treat with her or lose all in his investment.

That’s all these weaselly paper-pushers understood. Negative numbers on investment sheets.

The queen entered the throne room, every head turned to her direction and then every knee bent. As was right. She climbed the stairs and sat on Iron Throne.

As was her, and only her, right. She had paid a costly price for this prize and she would hold onto it with everything she had until her dying breath. No one, not a Dragon Queen nor an Undead King, would take it from her.

She nodded to one of the Gold Cloaks who brought in the man she had been told was starting trouble in Flea Bottom with a traitorous song. She sneered down at him. He’d clearly already received a beating from her men, dried blood caked over his right eye. From his knees he looked up to her.

Cersei remembered a scene so similar to this one when her bright boy Joffrey ruled. His time on this earth far too short. She would fix his mistakes. All of the mistakes the Lannisters had made. She would build a Lannister dynasty that would last 1,000 years.

Just like her father had failed to do so miserably.

She didn’t want to hear the song. Qyburn had already told her what the lyrics had consisted of. She wouldn’t give this showman any chance to perform. “I have been informed that you are telling lies against your queen. That you composed a song full of lies and blasphemy against your queen.”

“Aye,” the bard agreed. “I did compose a song, but it’s nothing but the truth. The dead rise against us all. And the rightful Queen and King in the North fight to protect us while you do nothing but hide in your high tower.” His eyes turned to the assembled lords and ladies of court. “Look out your windows if you don’t believe it. You really think the sun is gone because of volcanic cloud cover from Essos?” He turned back to the queen. “The Long Night is here, and you do nothing!”

The court laughed nervously. She glared at them and the laughter immediately stopped. “I am the
queen. That woman up north is only a foreign invader intent on destroying us all with her dragons, along with a rebellious bastard giving himself titles he has no right to.”

The bard spit at the ground, the sight of the brown/red mess upon the pristine marble displeased Cersei. “The Targaryens ruled for 300 years. Your cunt popped out a couple of your brother’s bastards. I don’t see how that makes you more queen than her.”

Cersei clasped her hands together. This little nothing was no threat to her and his words meant nothing. She would not allow anyone to say anything to the contrary by having an emotional reaction to his lies. “I can tell from your accent and terrible manners that you don’t know anything about royalty. Not even how to address your queen, let alone understand how the rules of succession are applied.”

“I understand fine.” The bard got to his feet, but he still looked as if he were mere seconds from dropping to his knees again. Cersei watched with a raised eyebrow. “My cousin joined the Lannister army years ago. All the armies running around at that time, you know, but he picked the Lannister one since they paid the best. The Starks and Baratheons may have had honor but they didn’t pay shit. Everyone knew that. He was loyal to your family, and he saw that thing in the Dragonpit. That living dead man that comes for all of us.”

Cersei remembered the dead man who came for her. That thing that had terrified her. That thing that had caused her to have troubled sleep for months now. Who was this cousin? She would have him found and silenced. Cut his tongue out. She showed none of this on her face, scoffing at the notion outwardly.

The bard didn’t let up though, even as the gold cloaks grabbed his arms once more and forced his knees to the ground again. “The dead are coming and you sit on the throne, doing nothing!” The gold cloaks that had grabbed him to lean forward. The Mountain began to walk towards him, sword out. “You will kill us all while the Dragon Queen and her King in the North protect us all!” He looked up once more, hatred in his eyes. “I am happy to die for the true queen and king of the Seven Kingdoms.”

The Mountain, rather than taking off the head cleanly stabbed the man in the shoulder. The bard cried out, as the Mountain took the sword out and then brought it into the other shoulder. He continued stabbing him, careful to never hit a vital organ or a major artery. Not giving the bard the quick death he now begged for. It took several long minutes for the screaming to stop as the blood loss became too much for any man to live through.

The gold cloaks let go, a slight splash in the pool of blood the body plopped into dirtying their bright garments. They looked disgusted at their stained armor and clothing.

Cersei looked at the others in the court. Some looked to her, terrified, but others, others stared at the body of what was left of the musician. She looked at these lesser nobles. Their looks were a combination of consideration and horror. She knew they believed the words of this nobody from nothing. She knew they wondered. She knew they were plotting against her. Everyone was against her now.

She would remember everyone one of them. They may need to be removed. Permanently.

Cersei moved to leave, but then she felt it – a trickle of blood down her thighs. No, she thought. No, not this. Not now. She had given so much to build her dynasty. Luckily, her black gown hid it, but she remained on her throne. She had given everything for this, for her children, and she would never have another with Jaime gone.
That hateful bitch’s words echoed in her mind, as they had never left her, not once since she’d heard them, “Queen you shall be…until there comes another, younger and more beautiful, to cast you down and take all that you hold dear.”

“Gold shall be their crowns and gold their shrouds. And when your tears have drowned you, the valonqar shall wrap his hands about your pale white throat and choke the life from you.”

Cersei sat on her throne as she felt herself lose her last child, hoping no one would see the blood.

Her face did not betray her sorrow.
Bitter Knowledge

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay. This chapter was a bit of a struggle as this story has become much more of a monster than I anticipated. The last chapter is pretty much done, so I know where this is all landing, but it’s about 10 chapters away. Thank you for your patience and I hope those of you still enjoying the ride continue to do so!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Theon Greyjoy had only been in this room once before, but it looked so different. The queen’s throne remained empty and beneath it was a council of five, which included representatives from the different classes of Meereen, including a former master and a former slave. Theon didn’t quite know who to look at, far more used to monarchs and lords instead of committees.

“What did you say you needed?” A dark-skinned man whose name Theon couldn’t hope to remember asked.

“I’m an ally of Queen Daenerys. I need her help to rescue my sister from my uncle in Braavos. Preferably before he leaves to return to Westeros.”

All five council members looked at him like he was telling them some kind of crazy story. Another council member who had piercings through his face said, “The queen is not here. She is in Westeros reclaiming her birthright.”

Theon nodded, they had gone over this already. “Yes, and I was helping her to win back her throne. As I said, I am her ally.”

A scarred man said, “So why are you here? Shouldn’t you be there, helping her win?”

“I’m trying. My sister was captured and I followed my uncle to Braavos. He’s gathering an army there, so I need help to rescue her and defeat him.”

They still looked confused. Theon wished he could be gifted at this. He thought of Robb, who would have explained himself much better than Theon could ever hope to. Robb had always been the best of them, the one with a silver tongue. He missed his friend, wished he would have stayed by his side, even if that had mean his death.

What had he accomplished since then? The only thing slightly worth note was rescuing Sansa Stark, but that was only after letting her into the situation in first place. Theon wished he was a braver man, a better man. He wished he could be the man he’d always hoped to be.

Now was not the time for such thoughts. He tried again, “I need fighting men. I need your help.”

The red woman who’d said nothing the entire meeting spoke now, “Do you have news of our queen? The last messenger we received told us of our queen’s great victory against the…” The woman’s eyes looked up, unable to remember the name Lannister, so she shifted as she continued. “...her enemy. But I worry for my queen. I’ve seen troubling things in the flames, Theon Greyjoy.
Men of ice, darkness covering the land, great walls tumbling down.”

Theon was Ironborn and he’d worshiped the Drowned God his entire life. He never knew what to make of these fire-worshippers. He suspected a trick that she had heard news before his arrival, rumors, but he decided to tell the queen’s people what had happened. Of the alliance she’d made with the North and her new fight against the White Walkers.

The men on the council still looked at him as though he were crazy, but the red woman listened to every word he said with great interest. Once she absorbed his words, she folded her hands and pursed her lips. She looked to her fellow council members. “Our queen is in need, not for men but for the gifts of fire and blood. We must help her in anyway we can, spread word to Astapor and Yunkai. I must speak with my sisters.”

The red woman stood, her mind clearly elsewhere though her fellow council members didn’t seem to understand what she was saying either. Servants came in and orders were issued, the red woman walked away, and the other council members followed.

Theon tried to stop them from leaving. “But what about me? What of Yara? I need men!”

He was ignored.

Theon felt like a failure. He had Yara’s men waiting on boats at the docks. He’d told them to see about securing any more ships so they could transport the men he’d gather. He couldn’t bare the thought of going back to them empty-handed.

The Ironborn didn’t respect the weak, which was all Theon had ever been. He should have drowned when Euron had held Yara hostage. He should have slit his own throat after escaping Ramsay. He should have thrown himself from the walls of Winterfell after he burned those boys. He should have died long ago.

A man stepped out from one of the throne room alcoves. He was eating an apple, carving it up with a knife that had a naked woman for a handle. It was the kind of thing that Theon would have admired a few long years ago. The man bit down the crunch of the fruit echoing in the empty room.

“What were you trying to gain with that? Meereen was in revolt a mere year ago, they aren’t going to give you their fighting forces to wage some imaginary war with ice demons. Why would you ever think they would?”

Theon thought of the thing he’d seen in the Dragonpit. “If they’d seen the enemy they would understand. But I didn’t come here for that. I just need some men to help me get revenge. To rescue my sister.”

The other man circled around him, like a predator toying with his prey. “I’ve heard of the dreadful pirate, Euron Greyjoy. Never faced him in battle, but I’ve heard the tales of his ruthlessness.” He stopped pacing, his eyes looking Theon up and down, slowly, as if measuring him up. “I don’t know you, Theon Greyjoy.”

Theon bowed his head, but he found it in himself to say back, “I don’t know you either.”

The man gave a charming smile. How the ladies must love the rogue, Theon thought ruefully. “I am a sellsword, Daario Naharis. Sellswords are what you need. I could make that happen for you.”

“I prefer men with loyalty,” Theon sneered. “I wouldn’t trust sellswords to do my fighting.”
Daario’s eyes narrowed and his mouth shifted to a smirk. “You Westorsi are all the same. You cloak yourselves in your honor and think it makes you better than eastern savages. But it’s not true. You see, my motives are simple and out there for anyone to see: I like killing, I’m good at it, so that’s how I make my living. If I betray anyone, it’s just the cost of doing business -- the enemy had a heavier purse. Simple enough.” He put his arms out as he shrugged as if he had no control over such things. “You Westorsi are different. You sew your animals onto your clothes, you exchange your words and make your promises. What makes you men betray?”

The words made Theon stiffen. Daario noticed, smirking. “How many have you betrayed, Theon Greyjoy? You didn’t do it for anything as simple as money, did you? No, for more words and promises, I expect. That’s how you honorable men are. Hard to predict, not like men like me. We’re far more trustworthy because you know exactly what makes us tick, what will cause us to turn. You nobles…” Daario snorted. “You’ll try to kill a baby girl in her crib just because the animal sewn on her swaddling clothes is no longer in fashion.”

Daario threw what was left of the apple to the ground. A servant hustled in to pick it up and then hustled out again. A former slave, Theon suspected. He wondered if that man truly thought his situation better than it’d been before Daenerys Targaryen.

Theon stayed focused on the sellsword though, trying not to let his words affect him. He tried to sound businesslike. “How men do you have?”

“A few thousand,” Daario answered, just as businesslike. “They could be ready to sail by day’s end if needed. Though most would appreciate the chance to get one good fuck in before a long trip on a ship.”

Theon nodded. It wasn’t ideal, but it was the best plan he could see. “Why are you helping me?”

“I’m not helping you. I don’t know you. Don’t care about you. I’m just bored, and so are a lot of my men. Training a guard force, keeping the peace…” Daario shook his head. “We’re men of violence. I was raised in fighting pits. I’d rather battle with you than stay here.”

“I don’t mean to disrupt the peace,” Theon thought of the queen’s dragons. He didn’t want to upset her.

“Fuck that. It’s peaceful enough. Plenty of guards have been trained, time to test them for real anyway. Plus some of my men would rather stay here and continue to get fat. There are two kinds of sellswords: those who are just looking for wealth enough to retire and those who blood only sings when they spill another’s. If you only live when you use the sword in your hand, you might as well get paid for it.”

Theon held out his hand for Daario to shake, the sellsword clasped Theon’s forearm. Theon thought of Yara’s men. They had gotten what they came for, a real chance to rescue his sister. Daario’s men might not be sailors, but the Ironborn could handle that. They just needed more men who could kill.

“When do we sail out?” Daario asked.

“As soon as possible, so tell your men to be quick with their whores.”

Daario barked out a laugh. He paused, his jaw shifted from one side to the other, then he asked, “How is our queen?”

“Fine,” Theon replied. He thought of the last time he’d seen the queen, eye-fucking Jon at that
meeting. It hadn’t really surprised Theon to see, despite his dour attitude, Jon could have been just as popular as Robb or himself if he’d wanted to attract girls. What had surprised Theon was Jon eye-fucking the queen right back. Honorable, celibate Jon, who never thought with his dick, convinced the queen to sail with him for “alliance purposes.” Theon would have never guessed the bastard had it in him. Jon had changed in their years apart.

“That dwarf marry her off yet?”

Why did the sellsword care, Theon thought. “No, but I wouldn’t be surprised if she is by the time we see her next.” If they saw her. Theon had the faster ships, perhaps he could attack his uncle before reaching Westeros. “I wouldn’t be surprised if she was pregnant too.”

Daario’s eyebrow raised. “What? Pregnant?”

Theon shrugged. “I think Jon’s certainly going to try to put a baby in her.”

Daario snorted. “Jon? Who is Jon?”

Theon answered, “He is, was, the King in the North.”

“Another king. How many kings does Westeros have?”

“Too many as of late,” Theon replied.

“Poor Daenerys, married to some old northern king. She spent all that time avoiding the old bear, just to wind up in Westeros married to a man just like him.”

Theon was confused. “I don’t think Jon’s much older than the queen. He’s younger than me.”

Daario’s jaw twitched. “Is he good looking?”

“Most people think so.”

Daario had a sour look on his face at this information, but he wiped it off quickly. He shifted back to a jovial tone. “How quickly can your men sail?”

Varys looked down at Tyrion, looking unamused. Tyrion guessed it would be before dawn if such things could still be measured. “This is a terrible plan, and I must protest it once more.”

“It is,” Tyrion agreed. “But we’re at the point of terrible plans.”

Varys said nothing, but Tyrion knew it was unlikely that Varys would stick to the terms of this terrible plan. “It feels like you’re getting rid of me.”

“Why would we do that?”

“You don’t need me here. You’ve made that perfectly clear.”

“You’ve also made it clear that you don’t want to be here. You hate the North, hate the cold weather, and want nothing to do with the walking dead men. You’ll do more good in Essos right now. Check in on our queen’s kingdoms.”
Varys nodded. Tyrion worried. When Varys was angry and not saying much, he was at his most dangerous. He extended a hand. “Take care of yourself, friend.”

Varys took his hand out of his sleeves, shaking Tyrion’s hand with a surprising grip. “You as well.”

The spymaster got into the liter. Tyrion stood and watched it leave. He felt no peace watching the spymaster leave.

“You look like you just swallowed some bad wine,” the familiar voice did bring Tyrion some comfort. He turned to see his old friend.

Bronn lifted the edges of his mouth in what might be considered a smile. “Cold as fuck out. Why’d you drag everyone up here?”

Tyrion’s eyebrow lifted. “I was trying to be practical. Or would have you preferred to let the dead take the northernmost kingdoms before you fought them?”

Bronn snorted. “I haven’t even seen one of these fuckers yet, but they certainly have got your brother in a fit.”

Tyrion wished he could joke with his friend once more, but so much had happened since the more innocent days of Joffrey’s rule. Gods, Tyrion though, the world really has gone to the seven hells if he thinks fondly on those days under the vicious idiot.

He wondered what would have happened if that little shit had lived. Margaery Tyrell might still be alive, if much worse for the wear. But Cersei never would have gained as much power with that son of her’s; she never could control him. Tyrion had a hard time believing no one would have killed the king at some point though. He was too impulsive and stupid to ever be respected, too cruel to be loved.

Tommen might have worked as a ruler had his grandfather minded him rather than his mother. It was the only regret Tyrion allowed himself in killing his father. The collateral damage. Tommen and Myrcella might have lived with Tywin Lannister around to protect him. Though based on what Varys had told him, nothing, not even Tywin Lannister, would have saved the children from their cruel fates. Myrcella poisoned by those cunts; Tommen throwing himself from his tower after the Sept blew up.

Perhaps he should blame himself for Myrcella, he’d been the one to send her to Dorne, into the hands of their enemies.

“I need a drink,” he announced to Bronn. “Care to join me?”

“Only if you have some of that good stuff stashed away. This northern piss gives me a bad hangover.”

Tyrion smiled and nodded, leading the way back to his chambers. Bronn whistled when they entered, “Someone has been moving up in the world. I got a cot in the tent out in the snow.” He moved a chair right in front of the roaring fireplace.

Tyrion moved to grab a couple bottles of the Dornish red he still had stashed away. “That’s what happens when you back the winning side, as any good sellsword knows.”

“War ain’t over yet,” Bronn answered with a shrug.
“Do you really think Cersei can win?” Tyrion was looking for reassurance, as he had his own doubts. He knew his sister well. She would never go down without a fight. She’d rather they all die than admit defeat. It was why Tyrion was reluctant to attack King’s Landing directly. He knew Cersei probably still had caches of wildfire. He knew as well as she did what Jaime had stopped the Mad King from doing. He also knew that she might be understanding Aerys’ logic with her enemies closing in.

“No, but I’m not sure your queen has it in her to win it either,” Bronn held out his glass to be filled. Tyrion frowned, “What do you mean?”

“She could have won that war against the Lannisters at any time, but she chose to fight it with one hand behind her back. Seven hells, you saw that battlefield, it was a massacre more than a war, and that was only part of her forces and one dragon. We’d be better off now if she’d been more ruthless then.”

It was a thought that sometimes plagued Tyrion. How he wished they would have held off their battle with Cersei and went North right away. Though that might not have helped. Olenna and the Sand Snakes were only allied with them for revenge against Cersei. They might not have helped against White Walkers. Plus, ignoring Cersei wouldn’t have stopped her from waging war on them anyway. They’d still be fucking. “A ruling queen can’t kill her subjects. It doesn’t make people want to kneel to her. Could have she burned down the Red Keep and eliminated Cersei right away? Of course. But then people would have called her the Mad Targaryen Queen, just like her father.”

“They call her that anyway, you know. Though the northerners seem to be more fond of “the foreign whore,” I’ve noticed. Used her fiery cunt to entrap their king.” Bronn finished his drink, pouring another immediately. “Though what honest man could blame him? A beautiful queen offers to suck your cock, you give her whatever she wants and say thank you.”

Tyrion barked out a laugh. He wasn’t sure why. Maybe it was because it was strange to hear a simple truth about a complex issue he’d been wrestling over since first seeing Jon Snow knock on the queen’s door on that trip. Tyrion had seen the look in Jon Snow’s eyes when he first looked upon the queen, he wanted to fuck her the first time he saw her. It wasn’t shocking that when she let him, he did.

Bronn’s eyebrow raised, “So she’s fucked him then?”

Tyrion took a long drink. “Fucked implies past tense, which it most certainly isn’t.”

“That lucky bastard.”

Indeed, Tyrion thought. He confessed against his better judgement, “They’ve been fighting lately. Though I figure they’ll have angry sex at some point and get over it. They’re so young. Good kids, but young.”

“And they’re leading us in the battle for the end of the world.” Bronn’s eyes drifted to the darkened sky outside.

“Would have you preferred my nephew leading the charge?”

“Gods no. These two kids in love might get us killed, but that cunt definitely would’ve.”

Tyrion had no argument against that.
Jon woke in his bed, with Daenerys in his arms. They had moved out of the hot springs when he began to get overheated. He feared he would pass out like he had as a child and she wouldn’t be able to carry him back. She had laughed at his worry, “I’m stronger than I look.”

“Aye, but I’m heavier than I look.” She shook her head in amusement, but gave no argument, picking up their clothes and dressing herself again. They walked back to his room holding hands and once the door was closed and bolted, the clothes were removed so that he could make love to her again.

Jon hugged her a bit more, knowing he couldn’t put it off any longer. The guilt he’d kept back the night before was beginning to overwhelm him now. He should have told her. Keeping it from her might be a bigger betrayal than anything else. He really was a northern fool.

Still, he had been happy for one last night with her. She groaned at his too tight hold and Jon loosened his grip on her. Daenerys blinked up at him, smiling.

Jon felt his heart contract at the sight. Her hand moved to over his heart, avoiding the nearby scar. “I missed this, waking up with you.”

Jon took her hand, his thumb caressing hers. “Me too.”

She hugged him a bit. “Let’s not do that again. We’ll stay together always, no matter what.”

There was nothing Jon wanted more than to promise her that. He brought her hand from his chest to kiss it. Then he broke the spell of happiness that surrounded them. “We still need to talk, Dany.”

The queen nodded, pulling away with a sigh. She got up and began to dress. Jon was more reluctant, but he followed her example, finding his own clothes and dressing as slowly as possible. He thought about Sansa’s suggestion yesterday, to not tell the Dragon Queen until the war was won. He might die in this fight, he thought, it would just cause needless heartache for her.

But no, he wouldn’t lie to her. Wouldn’t hide the truth from her. That wasn’t the kind of relationship he wanted with Daenerys. He loved her. No matter how long or short his life might be, he wanted to be with her, always, but he would do it honestly.

Jon was still trying to follow the example of honest Ned Stark. A man who lied to his wife about a bastard, Jon thought bitterly. He took a deep breath. How did he start this? This conversation had haunted him for weeks, shouldn’t he have a rehearsed plan for it?

She took in a deep breath. “Jon, why did you leave? You are the bravest, most honorable man I’ve ever known. What made you run?”

Jon knew exactly what to say now. “You were right. About your brother Rhaegar and my… and Lyanna. You were right. There was no rape. The war was based on a lie.”

Daenerys looked confused, “What? How do you know that?”

“Bran told me. He’s some kind of magic seer now. I don’t really understand it.” He let out a sad, desperate chuckle. “I don’t understand most things anymore. Not sure I ever did.”

Daenerys nodded. Her hand went on his arm to comfort him. “Did you ask about them?”
“No, he was telling me about my mother.” Jon paused. He stepped away from her touch. “Lyanna Stark.”

He could tell she didn’t quite understand what he was saying. She bit her lip as she focused on something Jon couldn’t see. “That timing doesn’t quite work, unless she was pregnant when she ran off with Rhaegar.”

“What?” Jon asked.

“Ned Stark couldn’t have gotten Lyanna pregnant during the war. It would have to have been before it started.”

Seven hells, she really didn’t get it. She was truly a Targaryen if her first instinct was incest. “No, Ned Stark isn’t my father.” He took a deep breath. “Rhaegar Targaryen is. My true name is Aegon Targaryen.”

She reacted well to that, much better than he had. She smiled and cupped the sides of his face. “Blood of my blood.” Her fingertips brushed against his curls and Jon leaned into the comforting gesture. Had he overreacted? She smiled at him softly, sensing his fear.

Jon almost wanted to leave it at that, but she deserved to know everything. “There’s a little more. Rhaegar had gotten an annulment and married Lyanna.”

“Oh.” She withdrew her hands. Jon knew she was only beginning to understand the implications of what he was telling her. He could see the gears in her head turning as she processed it fully. “You’re the h…” Daenerys cut herself off. Jon could practically see the walls go up, the Dragon Queen replacing Dany. She was completely guarded now, her hands clasped together, but she quirked a quick smile for his sake. “That must make you happy.” She tried to smile with her eyes.

“Nothing about it makes me happy.”

“Jon, you finally know who your family is. You must be happy.” She stood, walking away from him. Her eyes focused on the darkness outside.

Jon wished he knew what she was thinking. He wanted to reassure her, but he wasn’t sure how. His instinct was to remain quiet, wait for her to speak next, but something deep in him screamed out that was the wrong thing to do. That he must bring her back to him, now. “It changes nothing, Dany.”

“It changes everything, Jon.” Her eyes darted to him. “Or would you prefer Aegon now?”

There had been no malice in her tone, but it still hurt to hear. “No, I’m not…” He cut himself off. How he wished he was better with words. “I’m Jon Snow. It changes nothing.”

Daenerys look away again. “Names are powerful. My name is all I had for years. I built an empire on the strength of the Targaryen name.” She turned to face Jon again. “It’s not nothing. It’s fate, Jon. We can rebuild our family. This is a good thing.”

He might have been fooled if not for the crack in her voice. She continued on, “We’ll figure out who sits on the Iron Throne later.”

He had done this all wrong. She didn’t understand. He didn’t want her throne. He took her hands, he nearly went to his knees, begging her. “No. I don’t want the throne. I want you.”
She gave his hands a quick squeeze before removing hers. “The throne doesn’t matter right now. We have to defeat the Night King and Cersei first. We’ll sort out details later. We are still in this fight together, Jon…” She cut herself off.

“Snow,” Jon told her, walking towards her. “I am still Jon Snow. I am still the same man I was yesterday. The man who defied you in your throne room when we first met. The man who pledged himself to you. The man who loves you. The man who will make you his wife.” He tried to take her hands again, but she didn’t let him this time.

“No, Jon. I’m barren. It’s the smart move. You need to marry another. We must consider the future.” She looked around his room. Tears were beginning to escape her eyes. Jon would have preferred hatred to this. He wished she was yelling, threatening death, not this sad understanding. “We should probably end this now, before it…before…being together now; it won’t help later. When we’ll…” She swallowed and licked her lips before continuing. “When we’ll separate, marry other people. This could be good. More possibilities for marriage alliances.”

No. “Daenerys, I only want you.”

She stroked his cheek, wiping away the tear that he hadn’t noticed falling. “You’re royalty now, Aegon. Want doesn’t enter into it. This is what must happen. This is the future of House Targaryen. I know you might not understand, but my name is all I had for a long time. If I can see it live on, I must do that. You can have sons and daughters to carry on the name, but I’m barren. You will need another woman for a wife.”

Jon couldn’t believe what she was saying. He had never expected her to react like this. “It didn’t seem to matter before.”

“Because I was queen. My options were limited. If you were willing to forego a wife who could give you a son, we might have been happy together.” A strangled noise escaped her lips and she took a moment to get the control back. “I would have had to name an heir anyway. I was being selfish with you. But now…It’s what’s good for our house. If…When…I take the throne, House Targaryen will rise from its ashes, stronger than before. This is good.”

It didn’t sound good. Even Daenerys couldn’t quite keep the sadness out of her voice and off her face. Jon lost his temper, “I don’t care about all of that. I love you! Fuck everything else.”

Daenerys’ voice finally broke, the emotion she was trying to keep back, breaking through. “You may be your father’s son, but I will not make Rhaegar’s mistake! I will not destroy my house for love. I cannot.”

“Rhaegar was married,” Jon pointed out. “Lyanna was engaged. We are not promised to anyone. It’s not the same.”

She hesitated. Jon considered that important. “Maybe not, but it doesn’t mean it’s the right thing. Rhaegar did the selfish thing and it destroyed our family. It destroyed the realm. We’re still fighting the wars he caused. I will not be selfish. I will do what is right. Like a true queen.”

Jon could see the tears in her eyes. He tried to hug her, but she stepped back. “I have to talk with Tyrian. Figure out what this means. I need time. Time to think this through. Maybe I’m missing something.” She looked at him again, tried smiling, but the tears in her eyes gave her away. “This is a good thing, Jon. I’m not alone. You are not alone. We are not alone.”

“You were never alone with me, Dany. Please.” Jon didn’t know what he wanted other than to stop her from leaving right now. “No one needs to know. Not ever.”
“I take it that Ned Stark was the only man who knew this. Smart man. Only one man can keep a secret. Or one man and a dead man. People will find out. It’s best to control how.” She attempted to unbolt the door, but it didn’t work on her first attempt. Jon could see how her hands were shaking. He wanted to help her, and took a step towards her, only to stop when she flinched away from his raised arm. He drew back. She turned to him again, tears now down her cheeks. She stopped trying to open the lock for a moment. “I need time to think about this.” Jon wanted to protest, but what could he say? She spelled it out even more clearly, “You’ve had weeks to think about this; I’ve had minutes. I need some time to process it.”

Jon’s head fell. He knew it. He knew it would ruin everything. Damn it, couldn’t have Bran just kept his mouth shut? Daenerys walked over and lifted his face, her hand on his cheek. “It may change some things, Jon, but it does not change the fact that we are together on this. It doesn’t change anything we’ve shared. It doesn’t change that I still love you. That I will stand by your side always.” She bent down to kiss him.

Jon looked up at her, his hands reaching for her, but Daenerys stepped back. “I need time. This information complicates things. I will need to consult my advisors on the best way forward. The best move for my future. Our future.” She pushed one of his curls back.

She turned from him and unbolted the door. Jon fell to the floor once she left. He felt like she had taken his heart with her when he walked out the door. Was this how she felt when she’d discovered him gone?

Jon just hoped she didn’t destroy his heart the way he feared he’d done to hers.

It took Tyrion a minute to realize the pounding he was hearing wasn’t just in his head. The source was his large wooden door.

He opened his eyes, apparently he hadn’t made it to his bed last night. He sat up and saw that Bronn wasn’t any better. He was still passed out. Tyrion made his way to the door, swaying from the incoming hangover.

He was surprised to find the queen on the other side of the door. Her eyes were wide and searching, her arms wrapped around herself as though she could hold her clear agitation in. She walked in without invitation, saying nothing though she obviously noticed the empty wine bottles.

When she walked over Bronn, she asked, “Is he going to wake up or do I need to order him out?”

Tyrion looked down out his friend. “He sleeps soundly, and I’d hesitate to wake him since he’s armed and his first instinct would be to attack.”

Daenerys nodded, her arms still holding herself as she looked out the window for a time. Clearly, she was upset about something and had come here to talk. Tyrion wondered what the right thing to ask to get her talking was.

He decided to just give her time.

It only took her a few minutes to say, “I may have just lost the Iron Throne.”

Tyrion didn’t know what to say. “What?”
Daenerys told him everything. He took it in. When she finished, he said, “We can fight it. Daenerys, laws and bloodlines aren’t what determine who sits on the throne. The person who sits on the throne and has the army to keep them there is the person who sits on the throne. It doesn’t matter who has the best claim. It matters who wins. My sister is proof enough of that.”

“I don’t care.” For the first time since entering his room, the queen’s voice broke. “I never even wanted the throne. Eight years ago, I just wanted to go home. But I needed an army to do that. So I got one. Then I figured out I would have to do something with that army, I had to take my throne back. So I planned to do that. That I meant I would be queen. So I figured out what that meant for me, what I would do with that power.” Daenerys broke down, collapsing to the floor, sobbing. Tyrion was shocked, he’d never seen the queen so vulnerable, so human. “Now I’m home and I just want…” Her cries broke her words. “Gods, I’m going to have to watch him marry another woman so that she can have his children.”

There it was. Tyrion sat next to his queen, letting her sob. His brain was already coming up with schemes to keep Daenerys as the heir, but he knew that Jon would never go for a return to the tradition of Targaryen kings taking more than one wife. One to bed for love and one to bed to breed.

When she quieted, he said, “Sometimes I forget how young you are. You bear the responsibilities you’ve had since childhood well, Daenerys. Better than most. Enough to make people forget the woman behind the queen. And you are a queen, your grace. Regardless of Jon Snow’s real name.”

Daenerys head rested on Tyrion’s shoulder. “You can switch sides, you know. He’ll probably take you on as his Hand.”

“I’ve pledged myself to you. You are the queen I chose. I’m not leaving just because it got a little more complicated.”

“A Lannister with loyalty? That’s a new one,” she scoffed.

He smiled, taking the joke as intended. “I blame myself. I really should have seen this coming. You’re a Targaryen, of course you would fall in love with the only person in the world who shares your blood. I just thought it was the Targaryen weakness for northerners.”

She laughed sadly. “Yes, this is clearly all your fault. You haven’t been warning me against loving him from the start.” She leaned her head back. “You were right. I was acting like a lovestruck fool rather than a queen.”

Part of Tyrion gloated over her words but most of him just sympathized with the poor woman. He’d been in her shoes more than once. In love with the worst possible person at the worst possible time. He comforted her as best he could, but he wasn’t good at this. Tyrion sometimes wondered if this had once been part of his father’s duties as Hand as well, calming and caring for his best friend Aerys. If he hadn’t hated Tywin so much, he might have liked to speak with him, learn from him. “I doubt you could have stopped yourself. You are allowed to be human.”

Daenerys hand clutched his arm. It made Tyrion tense up. He wasn’t sure what to do or how to act. And embarrassingly, after going so long without a beautiful woman’s touch, he felt his groin jump at his queen’s innocent actions. He thought of his sister to force that feeling away as he put a hand around Daenerys’ shoulders and kissed her forehead.

“If he really is Aegon, it may be for the best if you marry him. Consolidate your power so he can’t be a threat to you.”
“I thought of that, but is it the best option or just the selfish one?”

Tyrion didn’t know. “In any case, we don’t need to decide today. We have wars to win first. Let’s focus on that. Then we’ll sort out the throne and your marriage and Jon’s Snow parentage.”

She nodded, standing, getting control of herself. “Varys left?”

“Yes,” Tyrion confirmed.

Daenerys nodded again. Her eyes fell on the passed out sellsword. “Friend of yours?” she asked.

“Bronn, one of the best swordsmen I’ve ever met and once a good friend. He’ll be a valuable ally in the fighting to come.”

Her eyebrow raised, but she said nothing. Tyrion guessed it was because she had no room to talk when it came to finding sellswords in private bedchambers. She slipped back into a more queenly role, forcing down the woman and her emotions behind a mask of formality. She said, “Think on this problem, Lord Hand. I will make my own decision, but I would appreciate your guidance on this. I...” Her voice broke again, she looked down, forcing herself under control again. “I know my preference, but I also know my reasons may not be well-reasoned but emotional. I need logic and a clear head.” She looked again at the empty bottles, making Tyrion hang his head.

Wise, Tyrion thought. This was why he’d chosen her for a queen. He knew Daenerys would do as she willed, like every king and queen did, but at least she recognized that her emotions might compromise her judgement. That must mean something.

Though he also knew she might not appreciate his advice if it involved her not marrying Jon, or worse, if it involved killing the man. She would never go for that, though Tyrion could hear his father’s voice in his mind, “You cannot allow a threat to your power to roam free, especially if he has supporters. You must eliminate the threat permanently. It will be easy. You’re going to war, and he’s a man of honor. Put him on the front lines and convince him to be a martyr. He’ll fall on the sword himself, and your hands will remain clean.”

This wasn’t going to be easy.

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Jon let Longclaw’s handle fall from one hand to the other, never letting the sword fall, always catching it. He wasn’t sure why the repetitive, pointless action calmed him, but it did.

He had so much to do. He needed to get up. He needed to oversee his army. He needed to prepare for the Night King. He needed to plan. He needed to do so much.

But he stayed sitting, letting his sword fall from one hand to the other.

He’d spent his entire life wondering who he was and where’d he come from, now he would give anything to have never known. Never in even his wildest fantasies had he been a long lost prince who would fall in love with an exiled princess like one of those sappy love stories Sansa had loved so much as a girl. A Targaryen like the heroes he’d admired, in love with the first dragon rider in century, who was also the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen.

Life turned out strangely.
Jon had spent years, a lifetime really, coming to terms with being a bastard. And he thought he had, but he had never seen any positives in it. Positives that were so clear now. While Jon had always had a family, he’d never had a family name. No one cared what a Snow did, there was no responsibility to a family name. Nothing was expected of a Snow, except maybe treachery.

Many things were expected from a Targaryen.

Jon threw Longclaw to the ground, running his hands through his curls. He thought he was over this shit. He didn’t have time for some fucking identity crisis. He didn’t have time for any of this crap. He had responsibilities. He couldn’t just sit in his room and moon over some girl.

But then Dany wasn’t just some girl, was she? She was the most amazing woman he’d ever known, even without being queen and her dragons, she was compassionate and brave. She’d experienced worse pain than he had and she had risen above it, to a place usually reserved for gods and goddesses.

Jon groaned. He wanted to go back, wanted to be Ned Stark’s bastard again. What he would give to have the identity he’d loathed for his entire life. He would weather a thousand of Catelyn’s hateful glares for a return to a simple life, when his worst problem was that the mother of his siblings hated him. He wished he’d appreciated it more, even if he’d just been a boy with no real understanding of a man’s problems. At that age, Jon wouldn’t have even begun to understand the problems he faced now.

Ned would have understood. How Jon wished he could talk with his father. A man who’d carried a secret that could have destroyed them all. He would know the right thing to do. Jon had spent his life following the example Ned Stark had given him, always trying to do the right and honorable thing. What Ned Stark would have done.

An example that had gotten him, his brother and his father killed. Jon brushed these thoughts aside. None of this was helping.

Jon stood up. Enough, he thought. Enough with the self-pity. You have a duty. Your people are counting on you. You must be a leader. All of this can wait. You can torture yourself some other time.

He put one foot in front of the other, forcing himself out of his room. He talked to no one. He guessed his glower must have been something as any servants who crossed his path immediately shuffled in the opposite direction as soon as they caught sight of Jon’s face.

Good, Jon thought. The last thing he wanted was company.

Without realizing it, Jon made his way to the map room to review plans once more. He had these maps memorized, better than he ever had as a child being quizzed over them. He was arguing for a defensive line either along or at the edge of the White Knife. White Walkers didn’t have the ability to walk on water, yet. It was the best place to defend against them.

Most agreed with him, the arguments were stemming from where to station troops rather than if they should. Jon knew he needed to check in with Daenerys’ troops again, make sure they were adjusting to the cold well enough. He’d heard that another blizzard was set to arrive any day now. They needed to be prepared.

The thought of the Unsullied and Dothraki made him think of Daenerys, how she’d been nearly crying as she left his room. He could not afford to think about that, nothing had changed since Dragonstone, he still had no time for romance. She had been right about that at least, if for the
wrong reasons.

But it had happened. It was something he needed to deal with now, just like finding out his parentage. Jon sighed. He felt like the gods had cursed him. Like a battle for the end of the world wasn’t enough of a challenge for him, they had to pile on everything else.

The door cracked open and Jon’s head swirled at the intrusion. He was half-expecting the object of his thoughts to appear. Part of him longed for Daenerys to show, they were barely separated and already missed her. Sometimes he feared he was actually heart-sick.

But it wasn’t Daenerys, it was Sam. Jon tried for a half-hearted smile for his friend, but he suspected it wasn’t believable. “Hello Sam,” Jon said, his attention back on the maps. “Or is it Lord Tarly now?”

“Who can keep up with all the title changes, your grace,” Sam replied, a small smile dancing on his face.

Jon wanted to take the jab as intended, but he suspected it wasn’t believable. Damn his duties. “I’m no longer a king. It’s my lord.”

“But Jon…”

Jon cut him off. “We’re not getting into this argument, Sam.”

Biting his lips, Sam held back whatever he’d wanted to say, nodding. “Tyrion suspects something. He keeps interigatting me whenever we’re both working in the library. I don’t think he knows yet, but he’ll figure it out.”

Tyrion would know soon enough, Jon guessed. “I wouldn’t worry about it, Sam.”

“Why aren’t you worried about it now? You used to be,” Sam said looking away from Jon.

Jon thought of the Night King, of cold, unnaturally blue eyes focused on him. “Because it doesn’t matter,” he answered truthfully. Nothing else did. Even if it felt differently, only the fight in front of them mattered. Who sat the Iron Throne, whether he would get to marry Daenerys, none of it mattered in the greater world against the living death coming for them all.

“Who knows now?” Sam asked.

“Everyone who needs to,” Jon really didn’t want to talk about this right now. Then he remembered something, “Except Davos, shit.” Jon rubbed his face.

“I can go get him, send him up here,” Sam said.

Jon nodded, not really wanting to have that conversation either, but he figured it would be better to get it over with. He would hate if Davos found out from someone else. He went back to staring at maps again. Jon startled at Sam’s hand touching his shoulder, “I’m glad you’re back, Jon.” Sam gave him the same smile he’d given him when he’d returned to the Wall after his time with the wildlings.

Jon attempted to return the smile, but he just couldn’t. He loved Sam, his best friend, but he couldn’t feel anything beyond the worry of losing Dany. He knew it wasn’t fair to his friend, but he couldn’t stop it. He said, “Thanks, Sam.”

Alone again, Jon tried to think of what he’d tell Davos. Since he was no longer a king, Davos was
no longer his (unofficial) Hand. He didn’t really know what the old man’s role was besides an adviser. Though Jon knew that he’d be lost without Davos. He respected the older man’s opinions as he often saw things more clearly than Jon did. Not being raised as a noble helped Davos to see things that Jon couldn’t, have a more practical view of survival and politics. Serving Stannis had made the man brutally honest and gave him a firm understanding of the honor Jon tried to hold himself to.

Not to mention, Jon owed the man his very life. He would have been dead on the Wall, stabbed and betrayed by his brothers, if not for Davos pleading with the Red Woman on his behalf.

The door opened and Sam walked with the gray haired man at his side. Davos looked suspiciously at his former king, Jon wondered what Sam had told him when he summoned him.

Jon said, “Ser Davos, have a seat. I have some news. You’re not going to like it.”

He shook his head as he sat on a chair. “It’s never good news with you. It’s never Davos, your wife sent a note and she wants you to lie with a big-bosomed woman for your loyal service. No, it always we need to fight an army of dead men. I’m volunteering for a mission to go beyond the Wall and nearly die. I bent the knee to the Dragon Queen without telling you. The Night King has a dragon now too.” The old smuggler’s eyes narrowed on the man who’d been his king. “You’re going to put me in a early grave yet, yer grace.”

Despite the turmoil that was his life, Jon smiled at the old man’s words. “I’m no longer a king,” Jon pointed out.

“My lord then, though I wonder if you won’t be king again soon enough.” Davos looked at Jon pointedly.

The off-hand comment made Jon’s breath catch. He didn’t know anymore. He didn’t look at Davos as he told him the truth. Davos took it in with little reaction. When Jon finished, his former Hand asked, “What are you planning to do with this information?”

“Nothing,” Jon said.

Sam looked upset by Jon’s words, and he shifted from one foot to the other, as if he wanted to say something. Davos nodded. “That’s what I guessed. I would suggest you keep this information to yourself for now.” Sam did open his mouth at that, but Davos stopped him. “Plenty of people still wish to see the Targaryens dead, and the last thing you need right now is more enemies.”

Jon was grateful. Davos could always be counted on to give the most practical advice. Duty done, Jon turned back to the map, “Have you spoken you spoken with the lords? We need to begin digging those ditches now, not later.”

Davos nodded. “Mandarly said he can spare 100 men. Glover offered 50. Mormont 10. Grey Worm also mentioned that his men would be willing to dig. Any activity would be good for the Unsullied, as they are struggling with the cold. Though he didn’t say that, but I gathered it all the same from Missandei’s concerns for him and what she’s translated from the Dothraki.”

Grey Worm, Jon thought. How he had wished for more men and dragons on the Wall. Now that he had them, now that she had given him everything he could and how had he repaid her? By telling her that he also held a claim to the throne she’d worked her entire life to get. A potentially better claim than hers.

There was no time to think about such things. “We need to start gathering tools then. Anything that
could be used as a shovel.” He pointed to the map, showing where he wanted the trenches dug. Then he asked, “Have we lost men to the winter yet?”

“A few, aye,” Davos told him. “Nothing catastrophic numbers wise, just a few drunken fools who either walked into fires or walked away from them, which is basically a death sentence out in the elements of eternal night.”

Jon nodded. He’d need to get more precise figures from Tyrion later. They needed every man, woman and maybe even child to fight this enemy. He would also have to address the problem of drunkenness in the troops. He knew morale had been down since the sun left. He needed a solution to that problem as well.

Jon stared at the map. So many problems. Not enough solutions. He was tired. He wanted to rest, but he could not. He was Warden of the North, Commander of their combined forces. His journey to Last Hearth was the closest thing to a break he’d be allowed. He looked over the map again.

“We need to pick where we fight the Night King carefully.”

“What about the dragon?” Sam asked.

“Right. I forgot about the fucking dragon.” Jon would have to look at a map to see if there was anywhere in the North that had both a narrow pass and cover from above. He almost wished Torrhen Stark had tried to fight Aegon, at least then Jon would know where in the North to fight (or not fight) a dragon.

Davos’ eyes narrowed. Then his gaze connected with Jon’s. “Wait. We have two dragons, and we have two Targaryens.” He let his pause spell it out.

Jon shook his head, “Daenerys told me it took her years to ride Drogon. Dragon riding is a lost art, no one really knows how it works. And I’d rather not die by dragon fire.”

“The queen will be there, I doubt she’ll let anything happen to you,” Davos eyed him with a knowing glance, which Jon noticed made Sam uncomfortable. Jon remembered what he’d confessed the last time he talked with Sam, which made him uncomfortable.

Jon said, “She doesn’t control them. Not completely.”

“She’s their mother. That was an earned title. Boys listen to their mothers, no matter how big they get.”

Jon didn’t know anything about mothers, so he kept his mouth shut. Davos pressed, “You saw what I did at Dragonstone, how those dragons followed her, how they surrounded her for personal attention like children begging for a mother’s affection.”

Jon remembered the first time he’d seen that, walking from the caves with Davos. The sight had almost been as amazing as seeing the dragons and Daenerys by themselves for the first time. Seeing tiny Dany command the massive beasts. He and Davos had returned to his chambers in silence, but as soon as the latch of his door had been locked, Davos had said aloud, “If that woman wants us dead, we can do fuck all to stop her. You might be able take out some of those warriors and guards of hers, but if she sick a dragon on us.” There had been a pause. “What could any man do against a dragon?”

Jon had been struggling between amazement, terror and arousal at the time and had said nothing in response. He still had little to say about the connection between Dany and her dragons. Jon might have the right blood to ride one of her children, but he knew it would take an amount of time they
just didn’t have. He understood the connection better than most as it resembled what he had with
Ghost. But he also understood that his connection had come partly from raising Ghost as a pup, just
as Daenerys had raised her dragons from when they were hatched. Plus dragonriders were
different, the connection had some magic to it, something no one truly understood. Even if
Daenerys willed it, Jon doubted Rhaegal could be forced into accepting him as a rider. It would be
similar to taming a wild stallion; it would take time to build the necessary trust.

Time they did not have. No. Jon would remain on the ground with the troops as planned. He told
Davos as much. Jon could tell the matter wasn’t settled from the sour look on his former Hand, but
the matter was dropped for now.

Jon closed his eyes. Davos asked, “Does the queen know?”

“Yes,” Jon had to force his voice not to break.

“How did she take that news?” Davos asked. Jon refused to meet the older man’s gaze.

“She’s still taking it in,” Jon did not want to talk about this, anything else.

Davos nodded, once again, letting the topic drop for now. But Sam pressed, “Are you safe here?
She might see as the threat and…”

Jon stopped him before the thought could be completed. “She wouldn’t do that. Why do you all
think she’s a monster? I won’t fucking hear this again.”

Jon realized his outburst had been uncalled for. Sam was only looking out for him, just as his
sisters had been when they worried. But Jon was so tired of convincing people of Daenerys’
goodness. How could they not see her as he saw her?

It had taken him months to get there, he tried to remind himself. He shouldn’t be so annoyed. They
needed time, all of them, they would eventually see her for what she truly was. But again, it was
more time they didn’t have.

Jon already missed Daenerys. He dreaded returning to an empty bed tonight. Sam’s words brought
him back from his dour musings, “I’m sorry, Jon. But the political and the emotional don’t always
match up, like with Gilly.”

Gilly. Jon remembered. He’d wanted to do the political thing with her, but Sam was too emotional
about it. Now it was the other way around. He understood, but he hated this. Hated that Sam, and
Tyrion, and even Daenerys, kept trying to force practicality on love. Love wasn’t practical or
political. It just was. He had been wrong then. They were wrong now. Jon said, “It is like Gilly,
Sam. So you already know my answer to your good political advice.”

Sam sighed and nodded. Davos looked lost, but Jon had no desire to explain the reference. He went
back to brooding over the map of the North, hoping both men understood they were dismissed and
left him be.

It didn’t take Sam long, as he remembered Jon doing similar tricks as Lord Commander. With a
light clap on the shoulder and exchanged look, Sam left Jon to his brooding.

Davos didn’t get the message, possibly deliberately. He said, “That Red Woman always talked
about the magic in the blood of kings. I always thought it nonsense. But after what I’ve seen with
you, the tales I’ve heard about the queen, maybe there is some magic in royals’ blood. Targaryen
ones, at least.”

Jon said nothing. He just wanted Davos to leave. He wanted to forget he had any Targaryen blood in him. It didn’t matter. It changed nothing. It wouldn’t help him in this fight.

Davos continued after Jon didn’t responded, “I never had much use for the gods. The years have made me a cynical man. But it must be fate.” Jon chanced a look. Daenerys had said the same. “It must be fate that last living Targaryens would fall in love, here when we need the heroes of old tales as we face an enemy of old tales. A chance for an epic song of fire and ice that could be sung for a thousand years.”

Davos looked outside, in the direction of where the dragons had made their nesting grounds. “The queen was telling me that the dragons have hardly left each other’s sides since their brother was taken from them. They didn’t used to be like that, she said, they each claimed their own territory. Dragons are solitary creatures, yer grace, but that doesn’t mean they are alone. They are fierce and strong, but it doesn’t mean they do not need love, just like any other creature. Men and dragons were never built to be completely alone.”

Daenerys felt like she was walking through a haze, just going through motions since speaking with Jon. She understood and forgave his leaving completely now. She just wanted to ride away on Drogon, give herself some time and space to figure out her feelings.

She still loved him. That had not changed. That she knew. She also knew that the selfish thing would be to marry him, to consolidate Targaryen power and rule the Seven Kingdoms together. It might even be the right thing to do. She wanted to marry him and he clearly wanted to marry her; they would be happy together. Such a move would make sense politically as well, continue the tradition of keeping the bloodlines pure.

But she wanted to be a better queen, she wanted to put her people first. What would be best for them?

She didn’t know the answer to that question. She wanted it to be her marriage to Jon Snow, Aegon Targaryen. She didn’t know if she would ever think of him with that name. It would put the Targaryens back in power, where they belonged, and the people would flourish in peace once more.

Though marrying Jon probably wouldn’t be best for the Targaryens. It would be best for her family, and possibly Westeros, if they married separately, made more alliances. That way he could father the next generation, ensuring their line didn’t end with them.

But then who would rule?

She couldn’t work that out. She knew he wouldn’t fight her if she pushed him aside, but would that be for the best? If he was the true heir, perhaps the crown had always meant to be his and her destiny had been to help him. He didn’t like ruling, she knew, but he was good at it. She was still Queen in Meereen, she could go back to Essos once Targaryen rule was firmly established here. Maybe that was her fate all along. Maybe that would be for the best, as she was finding it hard to rule her kingdom in Essos from across the sea.

What was the best decision for the future of Westeros?
She couldn’t afford a mistake. Rhaegar had acted impulsively when he fell in love. He’d destroyed their family, their rule and broke apart the realm with his selfish actions. She could not repeat her eldest brother’s mistakes.

But then Rhaegar’s mistake had netted Jon, and Daenerys couldn’t truly regret any action that brought Jon into this world. She didn’t know what to do. She was lost in all the different possibilities.

She almost wanted to speak with Bran about it, but he could only look into the past and present, not see into the future. Daenerys felt like she always turned to magic at her lowest points. Hadn’t she learned her lesson? Magic didn’t solve anything. It just changed problems.

A knock on her door broke Daenerys from her thoughts. “Enter,” she called out.

Missandei walked in, a tray of food in her hands. Daenerys didn’t understand. “Why are you carrying that? You’re no servant.” Sometimes Missandei forgot her place, in that she was a queen’s most trusted adviser, not a slave.

“You haven’t been taking your meals with us lately. Taking them in your rooms instead. I thought you might enjoy some company.” Missandei set down the tray on Daenerys’ table, setting places for them both.

Daenerys smiled, her heart warmed. It was a kind and thoughtful gesture. “I would enjoy your company, my friend.” Daenerys put down the scroll she’d been attempting to read to join her friend.

The smell of the food made Daenerys’ stomach flip rather than growl. She had no taste for this rich northern food. She ate very little of it, considering it part of her way of giving to the war effort, helping them with the impending food shortage.

Of course, Missandei noticed her queen’s lack of appetite. “You seem ill, your grace.”

Daenerys brushed off her friend’s concerns. “This northern food isn’t agreeing with me is all. Too rich.”

Missandei remained worried. “But you were complaining of the handmaidens struggling to fasten your clothes lately. Suggesting you’ve gained weight recently.”

Daenerys felt her heart leap at the implied suggestion, but she knew it was a fool’s hope. She was cursed. “It’s stress. Nothing more.”

It was also the reason she had missed her last two moon bloods. This war was taking its toll on her -- killing one of her children only to enslave him, nearly killing the man she loved twice, the everlasting night, and forcing to leave her allies’ lands to Cersei’s mercy. So much loss already and they had a long way to go before winning.

The stresses of war also left Daenerys tired all the time, but she refused to show any of this. And refused to hope there could be any other cause for those symptoms. She would no longer chase fantasies of a child. If life had taught her anything it was that happiness didn’t come free and was often short-lived. Even finding Jon had had a bitter edge to it.

Only death paid for life.

She could tell that Missandei was considering her queen’s words, wanting to say more, so Daenerys diverted the conversation quickly. “What do you think of these northerners, Missandei?”
“They like to complain, and they voice every thought that enters their minds.”

Daenerys chuckled.

“They don’t understand you, your grace.” Missandei paused before she said, “Do you remember when I told you about the King in the North asking about you back at Dragonstone while you were away?”

Daenerys did. It had pleased her at the time. She had still refused to admit what she felt for Jon went any deeper than lust, but it made her very happy to know that he’d thought of her when she was gone. That he cared enough to try to learn more about her. Daenerys nodded.

“I think these northern lords need something similar. They don’t understand you. I know Lord Tyrion and Varys have been trying to fight this lion queen’s propaganda with our own, but these northerners don’t seem to believe words. You have to convince them with actions.”

Daenerys agreed. She believed Jon’s words that they would come to see her for who she really was when she fought beside them. But it needed to happen sooner than that. “True enough, but I need them to believe me now. We need to come together. We need to fight together. We can’t afford an ununited front in our first real battle against the Night King.”

“So show them that you are allies,” Missandei said. She grasped her friend’s hands, ignoring protocol about not touching royalty. Not that Daenerys minded. “I know he had other motives in mind, but the King in the North was right when he suggested you sail together. You need to show them that you are allies. You have barely been together with him in public since arriving in Winterfell. You need to show that we are in this together. That you are together.”

Daenerys nodded. It wouldn’t have been a burden, but gods, it might be now. To stand by Jon’s side and not have him? It seemed an unbearable torture. But her friend was right, as she always was. Daenerys would have to seek Jon out before she sorted out their future. They needed to be seen together in public, as leaders working together, like their people must also do.

Jon made his usual rounds in the courtyard, helping prepare training. He wished he had more time to do this. He actually enjoyed teaching.

He knew he’d have to leave soon though. He had to make his way to the forge where they were attempting to build the same weapon Lannister had used against Drogon. They were to be mounted on Winterfell’s walls. Jon suspected he would be alone, as Daenerys had no desire to see such threats against her children, no matter how much Jon assured her that Viserion was gone.

Ghost nudged Jon’s hand. Jon looked to his friend, but his direwolf ignored him. Jon’s gaze followed Ghost’s.

It was her. Daenerys was walking right towards him. Two massive bloodriders following her. Jon felt like a boy again, wanting to run from her. Or possibly run to her and cling to her. He knew he could do neither and stood as still as he was able, letting her come to him.

When she reached him, Jon could smell her exotic perfume on the air. He was trying to be strong, but one whiff of her had him wanting to kiss her, damn the consequences. He tried to force himself back to the present as she asked, “Would you care to join me on a walk?”
Still not trusting himself to speak, he nodded, waving an arm for her to lead. She turned to dismiss her guard, who didn’t seem totally comfortable with leaving their khaleesi in his care. Jon tried not to take it as an insult, but it made him choose to walk beside her rather than behind her.

He had been a king after all. Daenerys did not object.

They walked in silence for a time, neither knowing what to say. Not for a lack of topics, but there was so much to discuss, it was hard to pick a starting point.

Daenerys started, “You were right, back at Dragonstone. We are allies in this war. We need to be seen as such. I apologize for not keeping up my end on that, but I will do better now. We should try to be seen together as much as possible. Lead by example.”

Jon wasn’t sure how to respond to that. She had just asked for time apart from him.

Her voice lowered, “It’s political, not personal, Jon. I can separate the two.”

Which implied he couldn’t. It might anger him to hear if it wasn’t true, but it was one big mess to him, not two different things. His feelings for her both personally and politically were connected, whether he liked it or not. He guessed she didn’t want to hear any of this, so he kept his mouth shut.

They fell into silence again.

Ghost drifted from Jon’s side to Daenerys’, licking her fingers, which caused her to smile. Jon quite liked to see it. “He’s been much happier since you returned.”

Jon wondered if there was anything coded in those words, but he decided to play dumb and take them at face value. “Aye, we’ve been separated too much.” He petted Ghost affectionately though the direwolf’s focus stayed on Dany.

It might have annoyed Jon if it didn’t please him so much. Daenerys brushed a hand through Ghost’s fur, petting him as she walked. Jon wished he could have such open affection from her, wished he could be as certain as his wolf where he stood with the queen.

He wished for many things.

“Have you made any decisions about telling your people your true identity?”

Jon shook his head. “There’s nothing to tell. I am Jon Snow.” He took a deep breath in. “The people, my people, don’t need another claimant to the Iron Throne. They don’t need some hidden Targaryen. They need a son of Ned Stark, the declared King in the North. And that’s who I intend to be, Daenerys.”

Daenerys conceded. “I agree. The people need a king they chose more than one by rights leading into this war.”

Jon wished her words settled him, but he wondered about her plans for him after the war. “I could have reacted better. I was just…” Daenerys cut herself off. “I was surprised. I didn’t expect…” Daenerys stopped walking, turning to face Jon. He noticed they were somewhat isolated from the earlier gaping eyes. “I can’t tell you how happy I am not to be alone in this world.”

A Targaryen alone is a terrible thing. Jon thought about telling her what her...their...great-uncle had said, but he hesitated. He felt like he no longer knew the right thing to say to her. How was this easier when they were practically strangers? He knew her now. Knew her heart, and yet he felt
more nervous now than he had when he still worried about being fed to her dragons.

When it didn’t matter. When he didn’t truly care what she thought of him. When he wasn’t madly in love with her. Perhaps it did make sense.

He wished he could be good with words, like Tyrion. Wished he could convince her that he would marry her or no one. Convince her that it would be for the best. “I only wish I knew you sooner,” he said.

She smiled, just barely, “Me too.”

Daenerys began walking again. Jon followed, in step with her once again. She said, “I’ve been reading about the books in Winterfell’s library about the Targaryens.”

Jon chuckled. “Those tales were my favorite as a boy.”

“Really?” she questioned, but Jon didn’t elaborate. He didn’t want to give away just how thrilled he would have been as a child to find himself as a lost Targaryen prince, in love with a Targaryen dragonrider. It would have been a dream come true. That’s what she was to him.

“My favorite is Jaehaerys I,” Daenerys continued. “He built the Kingsroad, made peace with the Faith and ruled in peace for the longest of any of the Targaryens.”

“My favorite was the Young Dragon. I loved to pretend I was him when I was a boy.”

Daenerys eyes went upward. “Of course you’d like one that died in a blaze of glory during battle in his youth.” Her lips tightened. She stopped walking again, this time stopping Jon with a hand on his arm. “Jon, promise me that you’re not going to die in battle.”

“What?” Jon inclined his head. “You know I can’t promise you that.”

“You’re right, that’s not fair, but I don’t want you to do anything stupid and reckless.”

Jon stayed silent, which made Daenerys a bit more desperate in her worry. “I know you, Jon. I know that you might accept your death as a sacrifice to help me and your people. You’d comfort yourself with how it would be easier for me, but it wouldn’t. I don’t want you to die. I want you to live. That’s the one thing I know, Jon. I don’t know about the Iron Throne and the succession, how we fit into that now, but I do know I want you to live. I know that I don’t want to be the last Targaryen. I know that as much as it would kill me, I would prefer to watch you sit atop the throne with your wife by your side and your newborn in your arms.” She broke off with a choked sob. “Than for you to die.”

“Dany,” Jon’s gloved hand brushed a tear from her cheek. “That will never happen.”

“Jon,” Gendry called out. Reluctantly Jon dropped his hand.

Belatedly, Gendry noticed the queen’s presence, “Your graces.” Gendry’s eyes flashed to Jon’s.

Jon thought about correcting Gendry on addressing him, but the queen wasn’t, and he didn’t really care. It didn’t really matter what men called him. Titles had never meant much to him, even as he gained ones he’d once sworn to never have, titles had never thought he could have. Titles that may have been his birthright all along.

Jon glanced to Daenerys, happy that she could read thoughts, as he knew she wouldn’t appreciate that one. He turned to Gendry, “What is it?”
“I was trained by Tobho Mott. He was from Essos. He specialized in Valyrian steel. His lifelong goal, his dream was to rediscover its secret forging.” Gendry looked down. “I don’t claim to be as good as he was, but I learned a lot from him.”

Daenerys said, “The secret to Valyrian steel was lost with Valyria. Only my family,” she looked at Jon. “Only the Targaryens survived the Great Doom and they were shepherds. They didn’t know anything about forging swords.”

Gendry said, “But what made Valrinya so different? So special? Dragons. Now that the dragons have returned perhaps the magic steel of their homeland can return as well. We know dragonfire can forge steel, it’s what made the Iron Throne.”

“But it’s the Iron Throne,” Jon pointed out. “Not the Valyrian Steel Throne.”

“That’s just a name. Maybe the swords were transformed and no one knows it.”

Jon realized in that moment that the three of them represented the three people with the strongest claims to said throne. And not one of them had ever seen the damned thing.

Daenerys said, “Dragons existed for hundreds of years and Valyrian steel was never reforged even with them.”

“But did any of your ancestors really try? The Targaryens had Valyrian swords. Why give their rivals the chance to have them as well?”

Jon shook his head. “Even when they had their swords, the secret of Valyrian steel would have been worth rediscovering to the Targaryens. I’m sure some of them must have tried to forge swords with dragonfire.”

“I may be mistaken,” Gendry said, bowing his head again. “But I don’t recall any Targaryen blacksmiths.”

Jon considered it. Valyrian steel swords could kill White Walkers. They were more valuable now than ever before. If there was a way, even a slim chance, it would be worth it. He looked to Daenerys, his queen. “It’s worth a shot.”

She nodded in agreement. “What do you propose, Master…?”

Jon’s breath caught a bit. He remembered how freely Gendry had introduced himself to him, surely the boy wouldn’t be fool enough to do the same with Daenerys. Jon knew she had a good heart, but Daenerys was no fool and she had a well-deserved hatred for Robert Baratheon.

Gendry said, “Waters, your grace.”

She nodded. “So you’re from King’s Landing?” He nodded. “Which part?”

Gendry looked to Jon, clearly nervous about this line of questioning. Jon looked to Daenerys who seemed to be trying to put the young blacksmith at ease. “Flea bottom, your grace.”

“The poorest part. What was it like growing up there?”

Gendry shifted. “It was…fine, your grace.”

Daenerys’ eyes narrowed. “Tell me the truth.”

Still, Gendry hesitated. Daenerys explained, “The poor, the weak, the small folk, are often the
people who suffer most in the realm. I need noble and great houses for their support, but I want to help those who need it. Rich men in castles don’t need my help. Poor orphans in Flea Bottom might. But I can’t help those I don’t know. I can’t help those I don’t understand.”

Gendry looked at Daenerys as if seeing her for the first time, awed. Jon smiled to see the look on someone else’s face for the first time. Gendry said, “I don’t think I’ve ever met a royal like you before.”

“Met a lot of royals?” She noticed Gendry exchange a look with Jon. Her eyes narrowed.

Jon could feel her gaze on him, but her attention shifted back to Gendry when he answered, “What I meant to say is that I don’t know that we’ve ever had a royal like you before.”

Daenerys smiled softly. “I hope to be different. I hope to be better.”

Gendry nodded, giving her an awkward bow.

“Did you know your father?” Daenerys asked.

Gendry and Jon exchanged another look. Jon tried to will Gendry to lie, to avoid the question.

But he didn’t get that message. “Yes, your grace. My father was Robert Baratheon.”

Jon felt the immediate tension. His fingers itched to grip his sword handle, a well-honed instinct from years of fighting, but he didn’t let them. He wouldn’t hurt Daenerys and he didn’t want to harm Gendry.

Daenery gave a tight smile, “I see. Well, I do not hold sons accountable for the sins of their fathers.”

“You’re not going to kill me?” Gendry seemed surprised, which made Jon wonder why he’d told the truth if he feared Daenerys might kill him for his blood.

Daenerys grew haughty again, a trick Jon was beginning to recognize was how Daenerys covered her hurt and vulnerability, “I try my best to judge on man by his actions rather than his birth. Give me no reason to kill you, and you’ll live a long, safe life, cousin.”

Gendry seemed taken aback by the familial title, but Jon remembered, for all Robert’s hatred of Targaryens, the Baratheons were formed from a Targaryen bastard. Jon couldn’t think of the words to ask, but his eyes must have told her for him, for she continued, “I will never forgive him, but if I could, I might thank Robert Baratheon. He put me through the fire, so I could step out stronger. I have my dragons, my armies because of him. We may win because he forced me to grow and fight. I would have just been a spoiled princess married to some lord if not for him.” She stopped and Jon wondered if she was briefly imagining the life that she’d never had. Then she gave Gendry her queenly look, which Jon recognized from their first meeting. “But I feel I should warn you that I am not my father, nor am I my brother. Gendry’s Rebellion would not go the same as Robert’s Rebellion.”

Jon felt the tension come back. Though Gendry tried to lighten the mood. “I always thought the prince always deserved more credit than he got in that fight. He could have easily used a kingsguard like Ser Dayne to fight for him instead.”

“My brother fought bravely. He fought nobly. And Rhaegar died.” Daenerys’ eyes connected with Jon’s. “I cannot make his mistakes.”
Jon knew what she was saying, but he didn’t want to hear it. Drogon roared overhead, scaring Gendry, who nearly threw himself to the ground, but neither Targaryen moved.

“No time like the present, shall we?”

Daenerys could feel Jon’s presence at her side, and it made her long to grab his hand. To allow him to throw an arm over her, to walk together as a pair of lovers. But they could not, for so many reasons. She wished life didn’t have to be so complicated.

But wishes rarely came true. It was action and will that caused change. That allowed a person to get what they wanted.

She knew that Jon must have known that Gendry was a Baratheon bastard. He’d shown no surprise at the news, only some trepidation. How many more secrets did this honest man of the North have, she wondered.

They walked out to where the dragons were nesting and Daenerys reached for her children. They were out hunting. Daenerys didn’t want to call her children away from their tasks for this, as they needed to eat, so she turned to the waiting Jon and Gendry.

“Another time,” she said. “They are hunting now.”

Jon nodded. Gendry looked ready to protest, but one look from Daenerys caused him to bow and with a hasty, “your grace,” dismiss himself.

Leaving Daenerys alone with Jon.

She thought about how little time had past since she would have been thrilled to be alone with him. Now she wasn’t sure what to feel. She knew she still loved him. She could hardly look at him without remembering that. But the politics surrounding their new situation seemed to cloud everything for them.

He stayed beside her, silent. She wondered if he was waiting for her to lead, waiting for her instruction. She had gotten used to him being a king, Daenerys realized. He had never waited for permission before, but now...now he was just another subject.

She hated it. She almost wanted to marry him just to make him her equal again. But she couldn’t afford to be so hasty. Couldn’t allow herself to be ruled by emotion. That was where the Targaryen madness lie.

Daenerys began to walk around her children’s nest -- feeling Jon’s gaze follow her. The nest was nothing special for a dragon. The ground had been scorched and burned remains of past meals were scattered about it. She remembered being stranded at Drogon’s nest, and she realized despite it feeling like ages ago, it had probably been only a couple of years past.

How her life had changed since then. How quickly everything could change.

The only thing worth noting in her children’s bed was where they lie. Two large indents side by side in the middle of the nest. The sight made Daenerys’ heart ache. Rhaegar had often cuddled with Viserion, but Drogon had also stayed apart. They must miss their brother.
She missed him too. Daenerys dreaded seeing what the Night King had done to her sweet boy.

She turned to look at Jon, whose eyes held so much sorrow. They had lightened during their journey here. How she wished that happiness could have lasted. How she wished they could go back to those slightly more carefree days.

But such wishes were a waste of time.

Daenerys asked, “How are the armies progressing?”

“Good,” he nodded. He took a step closer to her. “I was about to send them out to dig trenches and put up pikes for where I expect the next battle to be. I wanted to ask you if I could use the Unsullied to assist. I think it might be good for them. Warm them up a bit.”

She moved closer to him. “You are commander of our united forces, Jon. I trust your judgement on how to best use our armies.”

Jon ducked his head, and Daenerys wondered if it was because he was embarrassed. She wanted to tease and flirt with him, but she didn’t think it appropriate. So she said nothing.

“What do you see in your future, Dany? After the war. Tell me.” Jon’s voice held something like vulnerability in it, and Daenerys had to turn away for a moment to collect herself.

She swallowed before saying, “I’ve had such a clear vision of the future. When I set sail for Westeros, I had plans. Good plans on how I would conquer this land, win back my throne and rule as a just queen. I thought I was prepared for anything, but not you, Jon Snow.” She went closer to him, so that she could reach out and touch him if she wished. “The King in the North and his tales of White Walkers coming for us all. How was I to prepare for that? How could I know what you would mean to…” Daenerys cut herself off, but it was too late. Anyone would have known her next word was “me.”

Jon stepped closer, invading her personal space. “I used to dream of you. Not literally, the way you did, but when I was Lord Commander on the Wall, I wanted so badly for the lost queen in Essos to come North with her dragons and her armies. And you have. Sometimes I still can’t believe they are here.” Daenerys wanted to break away at his words. Of course that had been all he wanted from her. But as if he could sense her thoughts, Jon’s hands tenderly cupped her face, forcing her to remain facing him. “I dreamed of your dragons and armies because I could never dream of you, Dany. You are so beyond anything my mind could have conjured up.”

“Jon,” Daenerys leaned her forehead against Jon’s and took the hand against her cheek within her own. And for a moment, everything fell aside but this man, and everything felt right and beautiful in her world. Daenerys wished that a moment could last forever. That she would never have to leave his tender embrace.

“Your grace,” someone called for one of them.

And then the moment ended as duty called for them both.

Tyrion was sick to death of battle talk. He almost longed for an attack from the Night King if just for a break in the monotony of talking. He looked down at his stew, another thing he was growing
sick of. How he longed for the delicacies he’d taken for granted in the past. Army rations did not suit a Lannister lord.

To his surprise, Jon Snow entered the empty dining hall, his boots stomping on the stone floor. He tensed when he spotted Tyrion, but he moved forward to grab his own bowl of stew. Tyrion feared the fool might try to sit elsewhere to avoid him, but Jon spared him the effort of following him by taking the seat directly across from him.

The former king, now Warden of the North, looked older Tyrion thought. Perhaps it was because the boy he’d left at the Wall still seemed fresh in his mind, but it seemed the hard truth of his birth weighed heavily on the lost Targaryen prince.

Tyrion knew Daenerys rather than avoiding Jon, had made a point to be by his side constantly. To show their people a solid front from their leaders. Tyrion wasn’t sure how effective this was, but it was good strategy, so he advised for it.

He had been busy in the library looking for any mention of the Long Night or White Walkers or anything useful, but no luck yet. He had also been asked to draft a will by his queen, but he found every time he put quill to paper, he hesitated to write the words.

Tyrion had wanted to speak with Jon Snow first and he would not let this opportunity pass him by. He looked around and saw that the hall was empty and they were as alone as they would ever be. Tyrion let the stew splash back into his bowl, as he dropped his spoon into it. “I never cared for beef stew.”

“Well, good,” Jon said. “There’s no beef in that stew. We’re already running low on meat.” Having two full grown dragons to feed was costing them thought Tyrion.

The Hand leaned back, “You know, the Mountain once spilled some beef stew in the hall and joked that it reminded him of Aegon Targaryen’s brains. It’s what would have happened to all of Rhaegar Targaryen’s trueborn sons.” Jon flinched. “Of course, you wouldn’t have fallen to the Mountain. No. Robert Baratheon would have taken his great warhammer down and crushed your skull himself. He despised all Targaryens, but he would have hated you most of all. Living proof that Lyanna Stark, the only woman he ever loved, picked the dragon prince over him. It was an insult that wouldn’t have been endured.”

“What do you want, Tyrion?” Jon sighed.

“I wanted to find out what your future plans are. You’ve handled this new, secret information very poorly so far. And I would prefer not to see you dead, or my queen.”

“Why would Daenerys die?”

“You’re a threat to her throne. Many would prefer a male heir to a queen. Especially with how well my sister is showing queen’s run countries. Your claim would be stronger without a definite Targaryen in the way.”

“I would never let any harm come to her.”

“Many have pledged such things, many have failed.” Tyrion stood for a moment, finished eating, hands clasped behind his back. “Three kingsguard to guard Lyanna Stark. I always wondered about that. Why Rhaegar would have left his best men behind, men who might have swayed the Battle of the Trident the other way. Why he would command kingsguard to protect a lover rather than their future king.” He looked at Jon. “To protect an heir, well, that does make some sense.”
Jon said, “It doesn’t matter. What is done is done.”

“It also never made sense that Ned Stark, most honorable man alive, fathered a bastard. Everyone just sort of wrote it off as his best friend finally wearing off a little on him, I think. How often do you think he thanked his old gods that you didn’t have silver hair and purple eyes?”

“Well, he did pray a lot out in the godswood.”

Tyrion barked a laugh.

Jon grew serious. “So what have you decided to advise Daenerys to do with me? Should I worry about a knife coming for me while I sleep, Lannister?”

“She would never allow that.” Tyrion shook his head. “Nothing’s decided. I only have been thinking over our options.”

“There’s only one real option, Tyrion.”

The Hand sighed. “No, that’s just the one you want.”

“It’s the only one I’ll accept,” Jon said.

Tyrion shook his head again. “You know what I hate most about this, you’re too damn stubborn. And honorable. It’s horrible combination that your Stark family is plagued with. The queen is stubborn too, but she’s got ruthless streak to balance her out. I’ll never be able to talk sense into you.”

Tyrion had noticed he’d begun pacing. He stopped. “We have to consider this carefully. This is the game of thrones, the great game; it’s no child’s play. There are no takebacks.”

“I don’t want to play. I’ve never wanted to be part of that game.”

“Well, it turns out you’ve been in it since you were born. You just didn’t know.” Tyrion began pacing again. “You should just be grateful that who found out happened to be your brother. If it had been anyone else -- it would never had been told to you. You would have only received a knife to the heart. We wouldn’t be debating next steps, we’d be mourning your death.”

Jon clutched his chest, rubbing over his heart. Tyrion remembered what his queen had told him, about the knife to the heart being true rather than hyperbole. He hadn’t requested to see for himself, as Daenerys had no reason to lie, but it still seemed unbelievable to him.

Then again, he was believing a lot of unbelievable things these days.

Jon said, “Okay, you want politics. Nothing’s changed. You still need a strong alliance with the North. Marriage with its Warden is still the best and most lasting way to do that.”

Tyrion sat again. “You’re right. Nothing has changed. Daenerys will sit the Iron Throne. But if she declares you a Targaryen…”

“If,” Jon interrupted, his eyes narrowed. “What are you planning?”

“Nothing yet,” Tyrion only sort of lied, annoyed at being interrupted. “But you understand your claim only exists if Daenerys publicly announces that it does. Your brother could lie and your best friend’s document could be forged. No one but perhaps the North would believe you. After years of war, the North doesn’t have the manpower to carry you to the Iron Throne.” Jon tensed, not
stupid enough to not recognize the threat. But Tyrion continued, “Though it may be to Daenerys” advantage to have a spare Targaryen. We could use your blood to father then next generation, the dynasty to leave her great kingdom to, as I have no intention of helping her build a better world only for it to go back to shit once she dies.”

Jon scoffed, “That’s not exactly my blood you’ll be needing then.”

“True,” Tyrion had to agree. Then he frowned, asking, “You aren’t sterile, are you? Because all this talking is for nothing if you can’t produce an heir either. It would make it much simpler.”

Jon blushed and laughed. “All those years of worry that I might get a girl pregnant. Wouldn’t that be the final punchline to the joke that is my life? All that worrying for nothing. I turned down way too much sex in my life if that’s the case.”

“I feel like that’s probably true in any case. One should never turn down free sex. Not that I’ve ever had such an offer. I always had to pay.” Tyrion’s first wife came unbidden to his mind. He had never paid her. Though the bitter thought accompanied it, no Jaime did.

“I’ve only been with two women. Neither have gotten pregnant, as far as I know.”

Tyrion nodded, leaping up from his seat. But another thought occurred to him and he said, “Do you know what the most surprising thing about all of this is?”

“What?”

“Ned Stark actually deserved his execution. He was a traitor to Robert Baratheon’s crown.” Jon opened his mouth to protest, but Tyrion cut him off. “Not for saying that Joffrey shouldn’t sit the throne, that was just the truth. But hiding the last living trueborn son of Rhaegar Targaryen.” Tyrion’s eyes went over Jon. “He could have overthrown the Baratheons and put you on the throne at any time. Probably should have tried that instead backing Stannis.”

Jon Snow didn’t seem as amused as Tyrion was by the thought of Ned Stark’s surprisingly just death. Possibly because it was his father and further compounded by all the problems Ned Stark’s seemingly unjust death had caused.
over them all from her perch. He noticed the Dragon Queen and northern king’s weird flirting. He noticed a lot.

Still he missed the man he’d briefly been comrades with, Beric Dondarrion, until the man was next to him. His face held a sly smile, “I told you we’d meet again.”

“Fuck off,” Sandor replied.

His gruffness usually made men run from him, but he should have known that Beric Dondarrion was made of stronger stuff than that. Suddenly, Sandor wished he’d gone with the men to build trenches. He wielded his sword, hoping that scared the fucker off, but that just made the other ignite his damned sword.

The sight of the fire made Sandor flinch. That worried him most about the fight ahead. There would be dragons. There would be fire. No avoiding that. Despite being saved by a dragon a few months ago, he still couldn’t stand fire.

If Beric noticed his discomfort, he gave no sign of it. The flame drew the attention of the other’s in the courtyard, as it was a beacon in this eternal darkness.

Sandor thought again that he should have left for Essos. But then he remembered what that Lannister bitch had done to his brother. He almost pitied the monster.

It only made him more determined to survive all of this so he could seek out his brother and settle that score once and for all.

Beric was talking, but Sandor ignored his nonsense about the Lord of the Light and his mysterious ways. The former kingsguard noticed some of the Essos horse savages watching Beric’s sword, speaking in their foreign tongue about it.

What Sandor had noticed first was that the horse warriors had some Lannister red on them, He didn’t like it. These men had fought against people who used to be his countrymen. It wasn’t right.

The Hound’s eyes drifted to where the Lannister soldiers were. They glared at the horse lords in their stolen armor. Armor they’d taken off the men they’d killed in battle. A horrible battle from what Sandor had heard.

This whole fucking place was a powder keg, ready to blow. That Dragon Queen better keep her men on a tight leash before fighting started, Sandor thought. Or that dead fuck should hurry up and attack. Warriors sitting around with nothing to do were no good for anyone. Just trouble.

Beric had snuck up on him, damn near making him startle. “War makes for strange bedfellows,” Beric said, his eyes following the Hound’s.

Sandor wanted to dismiss the words, but then Beric was no stranger to war either. “You scared? If you die this time there’s no coming back except as one of those blue-eyed fucks.”

“A little,” he admitted. “But then I’ve faced death before.” His eyes focused on something, or someone, behind Sandor. “Much like the man leading us.”

Man, Sandor thought bitterly. The man leading them probably only had his balls drop and grow hair on them a few years ago. He glanced behind him to see the young wolf in question, walking beside his great white wolf and the queen. It was not an uncommon sight in recent days, whatever tiff they’d had, clearly they’d worked through it.
“Whole thing’s fucking hopeless. There’s no winning this fight,” Sander said.

“Then why are you here?” Beric asked.

It had been the question Sandor had been asking himself, but before he could reply, the royals had approached them.

The Hound no longer bowed to kings, but he dipped his head to the queen. She had saved his life, after all. It earned her some respect from him.

But her eyes weren’t on him. The Dragon Queen stopped in front of Beric, she looked at his inflamed sword with a look that combined awe and enchantment. Sandor thought of the Targaryen history he knew; the family’s well-known obsession with fire. Perhaps she wasn’t so different from her Mad King father. “What a beautiful weapon,” one of her hands reached out to caress the flames.

The Warden caught her hand, bringing it back down. “Don’t touch it. You’ll burn.” He glanced to the other two men, seemingly embarrassed by his clear concern.

She seemed amused by his concern. Sandor suddenly remembered being on that boat after the trip beyond the Wall. He’d gotten stuck with wight guard duty, somehow, but every time he’d seen the King and Queen during a meal, they’d played this same flirting game, only in reverse. The queen would show too much concern for the pretty king and then cover badly. The king had just seemed pleased and a little amused at her actions. It had been annoying to watch then.

It was somehow worse now.

The queen allowed her hand to be pulled back. Then she raised an eyebrow and said, “You have much to learn, Jon Snow.” She walked away.

“Bloody women,” Jon Snow grumbled under his breath. He followed his queen and his wolf trailed him.

Sandor had to hold in a snort. Left alone with Beric again, he moved away before the other man could ask anymore annoying questions he didn’t know the answers to.

Jaime was almost impressed by the fighting force being developed at Winterfell. Though every time he saw a Dothraki wearing Lannister armor, he felt a mix of shame and fury. The army amassed was massive, Jaime’s paltry amount was almost embarrassing, but he had done what he could. It was better than no one.

But he’d seen that thing at the Dragon Pit. 100,000 of them were coming for them, if the queen and king...warden...were to be believed. He knew of no reason they would have to lie. Jaime Lannister was not a man who frightened easily. Seven hells, he’d stood up to his father, living dead men should be nothing compared to Tywin Lannister.

Still, Jaime hadn’t been sleeping well. He wanted to blame it all on the nightmare of that thing, but it was also that he missed Cersei. It hadn’t taken long for him to get used to sleeping by her side, as he had always wanted, as he had always thought was meant to be.
He missed her so much, yet he also knew it was for the best. She had threatened to kill him the last
time he’d seen her. She’d lied to him, kept plans from him, and then damn near ordered his death.
He still had a hard time believing it. He’d loved her his entire life, how could she betray him like
that?

Jaime wished he could pretend his heart wasn’t broken, and he kept the cocky smirk on his face to
fool the world. But he couldn’t feel that neverending confidence anymore. Too much had
happened. He flexed phantom fingers on his missing right hand. Too much had happened.

He felt her eyes on him before he saw her approach. Part of him wanted to walk away from her, run
even, but another part of him desperately wanted her company. He wasn’t sure which part he
preferred, but as the two sides warred, he stayed put and Brienne of Tarth walked right up to him.

“I’m happy to see you here, Ser Lannister. I’m glad you saw reason in the end.”

Despite her words, she didn’t even smile at him. He didn’t know why he was surprised. She never
fucking smiled. Always so serious. Why did he even like her? “I’m not sure it’s reason to be up
here, surrounded by people who hate me and facing living dead men. It seems completely
unreasonable, actually.”

She actually did crack a smile at that, which made Jaime’s heart leap a bit. He refused to examine
why too closely. “Still, it’s good to see your honor is still intact, if a little buried.”

“I don’t know what you mean. I’ve got shit for honor. Everybody knows that,” he grinned that
false grin that was so familiar on his face, but she saw through it.

“The men are saying the attack will begin any day now,” Brienne said. “Have you heard
anything?”

Jaime hadn’t. It was almost insulting to go from a Kingsguard Commander to leading the entirety
of the royal armies to knowing almost nothing about their future battle plans.

But then he didn’t want to press too hard for fear of pissing any of the people in charge off too
much and having it decided it would be easier just to kill him.

Tyrion would watch his back though. Odd how much he relied on his little brother these days.

Jaime replied, “A piece advice, Brienne. Only believe about half the camp scuttlebutt you hear.
And assume the half you believe is true is probably still false.”

Her blue eyes rolled at him. Jaime found himself drawn to her sapphires, blue as the sea
surrounding the isle she came from. He’d always thought Cersei’s green to be the most fetching
eyes he’d ever seen and ever would see. But perhaps he’d been wrong.

He shook such thoughts from his mind. Fool. He’d come up here to fight. No need for such poetic
distractions, and thinking of Cersei wasn’t helping him with anything. He twirled his sword. “Care
for a fight?”

Her eyes darted to his golden limb. “I’m not sure fighting a cripple is fair.”

The jest would have pissed him off to hear from any lips except hers. “I would say it wouldn’t be
fair for me to fight a woman, but I know better with you.”

The comment made the large woman smile. They spared. It was good enough to draw a bit of a
crowd, but not the ones Jaime had grown used to. He had always been the best, but up here, he’d
lost that too.

People watched the White Wolf fight rather than the Golden Lion.

Part of Jaime wouldn’t mind fighting the White Wolf one-on-one. He’d challenged the Young Wolf, who’d refused him, but he wondered if the bastard brother might accept. He would have more to prove than his nobleborn brother ever did. Insecurity could be a powerful motivator.

What gave him pause was the fact that Jaime might not win. He’d lost his sword hand since then, and while he could fight, he knew he still wasn’t up to his former glory. Jon Snow was rumored to be the best swordsman in the North, possibly all of Westeros. Jaime knew that reputations could be exaggerated, Ned Stark wasn’t as great as his reputation as the slayer of Arthur Dayne had led Jaime to believe. But the young man had years more fighting than his brother did, and while Jaime was beginning to feel his age, the Wolf was just out of the bloom of youth.

Plus, the Warden of the North was hardly ever seen without the Dragon Queen by his side these days, and Jaime had no desire to ever see her again except when absolutely necessary.

The distracting thoughts cost the knight and his opponent managed to knock away his sword. The crowd cheered, reminding Jaime that he wasn’t home anymore. Brienne of Tarth might not be from the North, but she had been accepted by them due to her connection with the Stark women.

Jaime Lannister would never be accepted as one of them. Throw one little boy from a window and apparently the North Remembers. Gods, Jaime sometimes hated them all. Like they were perfect men. At least Jaime wasn’t a bloody hypocrite.

The knight rolled to dodge what might have been her trapping blow to pick up his sword again. Widow’s Wail. He wondered if anyone knew that this had been part of Ice once. As Brienne’s Oathkeeper struck his sword, he thought how Ice was rejoined in the North again.

He paid again for his drifting thoughts, his lapses in conversation and Brienne slapped his backside with the blunt edge of her sword.

A wild red-haired man in the crowd reacted to that more than the rest, “Ah, naughty girl. I knew it. It’s meant to be!”

The man’s outburst, was he one of the Stark bastard’s wildlings, Jaime wondered, made Brienne blush. It made Jaime wonder. What was up with that?

The distraction made him lose. He never should have fought her, but the crowd liked it. It reminded Jaime of tournaments and losing to the princes and kings. Sometimes in fake fighting, it was better to lose. It was only the real fights you had to win.

The crowd broke up, but the redhead approached Brienne with his swaggered step. “You fight well,” he said.

Brienne seemed completely uncomfortable and confused. “Um, yes, well, I am a knight.”

The man nodded. “You will make beautiful, strong fierce warrior babies. You just need the right man.” His eyebrow raised and he grinned.

Jaime felt the need to intercede, somewhat amused to play the role of the dashing knight rescuing the fair maiden for Brienne. “She’s a Lady,” Jaime said.

The man seemed annoyed at the interruption but Brienne looked grateful, if still confused. The
redhead pursed his lips. “I know she’s a lady. I’ve got eyes.”

“No, I mean a highborn Lady. Brienne of Tarth. You can’t speak to her that way.” Jaime spoke carefully as he would to a child.

The other man rolled his eyes. “You kneelers and your rules.”

Before he could say any more, the Onion Knight approached. “Jon needs to speak with you, Tormund.”

“What does King Crow want?”

“He’s not a king or a crow anymore, so don’t call him that. He wants to go over what kind of creatures we can expect in the army. What they might have raised.”

“You people and your titles. He’s got to stop changing titles if he wants me to remember any of this shit.” He paused. “I’ve seen his cock, I’ll call him whatever I want.” Tormund walked off in the direction Davos had come from after giving Brienne a parting smile, looking very pleased with himself.

Davos followed, “That is not at all how that rule works.”

Jaime nearly laughed to watch it, but he thought Brienne wouldn’t appreciate it. Still he had to say something. “An admirer?” he teased.

“No, he’s…” Brienne searched for words, finding none. “I don’t know what he is.”

Jaime wondered if she was purposely lying or just really didn’t know. “Take it from someone who’s had his fair share of his fair share of admirers. That’s what he is.”

Brienne blushed at that, which Jaime chose to ignore. He watched Brienne sheath her sword, which for some reason made him think of his sister again. Jaime wondered if in another life like Brienne, Cersei might have become a warrior like Brienne. Perhaps that would have made her happy.

Brienne looked around them, seeing the glares Jaime was getting. He was used to people’s hatred so he hardly noticed it anymore, but she seemed concerned by it. “Why do they hate you so?”

“Oh, it could be anything. I’m better looking than any of them. The Lannisters beat the Starks in the last war. Or you know, throwing the little lord from his tower might have done it.”

Brienne looked at him, then bit her lip. She said softly, “It’s not fair of them to judge for your worst deed.”

Jaime snorted. He wished that had been his worst. He lowered his voice, “Throwing the boy out of the tower isn’t the worst thing I’ve ever done. Lying to my brother was.”

Brienne gave Jaime a look and opened her mouth to tell him something, but then she closed it again. She noticed something behind him, but whatever she’d seen must not have been important for her attention was lost as soon as it had been gained.

“What did you lie to him about?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

She shook her head then said, “Whatever it was, you should get his forgiveness. I’m pretty sure you’re going to need all the friends you can get up here.”
Jaime recognized some wisdom in her words. But then, the secret had kept so long, why bring it up now? What good would it do? For him? For anyone?

Then Jaime thought of the enemy they would face. One he might die fighting, and realized he couldn’t go to his death without confessing the truth. Tyrion deserved to know.

Jaime knew he’d have to speak with his brother. By all the gods, he wished he didn’t.

Having a conscience sucked.

The salt in the air made Euron’s very being sing. He was a true ironborn, only happy, only complete when at sea. He knew they were making good progress. He would be joining his queen very soon.

He wondered how she might reward him, perhaps with that delicious cunt of hers. He barely repressed a grin at the thought. She had sworn no such thing would happen with him, but he’d heard tell that her brother had left her for the cold north. Her bed would be lonely and cold. He might get his chance.

His fingers danced over the hilt of his dagger. After he impaled her with his dick, he might impale her with that. She was no real queen after all. She hadn’t the blood of the old kings or the new. She was just a power-hungry bitch. He was a king. He had been a royal since birth.

And he thought the Iron Throne might look good on him. He would accomplish more than his stupid brother could ever dream of. No, Balon had been a little man with little dreams. Euron would surpass him in every way.

Balon’s pride, his daughter, would watch it all, before dying herself. It would be sweet revenge. Euron was almost impatient to get it all finished. Hopefully the Dragon Queen and her northern pet would take care of those monsters, otherwise, well, he could always sail away if the Golden Company couldn’t handle the remains.

Euron could feel the erection forming at the thought. He decided to go below decks and visit with his niece. Along the way he passed a man with them, swabbing decks with the face of a sailor.

Euron paid no one any heed until he saw his niece, chained, dirty and just barely above starving. Sometimes he thought about letting her loose in her weakened state just to watch her fail in her weakened state.

But the short amusement it would give him wasn’t worth the risk. He would have his amusements, he merely needed to bide his time.

Yara looked at him with total hatred. It feed Euron’s ego and he smirked at her. Grinning at her in her cage. “How are you, dear niece?”

She once yelled at him through her gag, rattling her chains as she strove to get at him. But she did none of this now. It disappointed Euron. He had hoped she would have more spirit than that.

But then maybe she thought she was biding her time as well.
Euron paced before her. “I trust your accommodations are still acceptable?” She glared at him. It amused him to see. “Oh, niece don’t look at me so. Let us remember the good times between us.”

He made a show of trying to come up with a good memory, before settling on, “Oh remember when your men chose me for a king over you despite the fact I’d just killed the last one? That was fun.” Euron grin. “Or how about the time your brother left you like the coward he always was, leaving you to my mercy?”

Yara looked away from now. Euron grinned, knowing that was still a sore spot for the woman. “Yes, baby brother who let himself get tortured despite your brave rescue. Baby brother who’s betrayed every fool who ever trusted him. Such weakness taints the blood. It’s why you’ll never beat me. You only live as a hostage. I need your men to see me kill you. They will follow me rather than the soft-headed brother of yours.”

One of his sailors ran in. “There’s something...strange on the horizon. Come quick.”

Euron was annoyed at being interrupted and turned to find the sailor had already left. This annoyed him even more and he gripped the hilt of his knife. He pushed the emotion down as he turned to Yara. “To be continued,” he said with his most charming grin.

He went above, without much speed. Whatever had his men in a tizzy couldn’t be much.

He was wrong about that. When he looked out on the horizon he saw something he’d never seen before.

Despite being in full daylight, a darkness fell over the direction of Westeros. A darkness that spread as far as could be seen. It chilled Euron’s blood to see.

One of the men called out, “We should turn back. Westeros is cursed!”

“Shut up!” barked Euron. He would hear no weakness. They were ironborn, they came back stronger. And as king, he was strongest of them all.

Harry Strickland, Commander of the Golden Company, approached him. A former paymaster, Euron sometimes wondered how the man had rose to power. He had the look of a fighter, but his portly belly and grey side whiskers spoke of his true nature. The man’s eyes focused on the darkness beyond them, but his dark eyes gave away no fear. “Is everything okay?”

Euron forced a grin. “It’s fine. Can I help you with something?”

The commander stood at the side of the boat, his arms folded. His eyes stayed on the darkness they sailed into. “You keep visiting that woman you’ve got chained up below decks. Why? Who is she?”

Euron wanted to refuse to answer, but he knew despite their contract, the Golden Company weren’t as loyal as they advertised. They were just sellswords even if they called themselves exiles. The king answered, “She’s my niece, and not anyone you need to worry about.”

The man kept looking to the dark horizon, but his jaw tightened. “Why are you keeping her around? You should slit her throat and throw her overboard.”

“Not until Theon can know how he’s failed.”

“Theon?”
“My nephew, her brother.”

The commander didn’t look impressed. “Is she leverage if your queen fails? You’re planning on using her if the war goes south?”

Euron lied, “Of course not. Queen Cersei won’t fail.”

“I’d have more respect for you if that was the answer. I can understand a back-up plan, but this family drama bullshit, it’s best left behind when a man heads to war.”

The commander walked away, leaving the king to stew as darkness overtook them.

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Tyrion had once longed for a challenge that would tax his mind, now he had too many. He thought he’d had a constant headache since arriving in Winterfell.

Everytime he solved one problem a new one presented itself. Make temporary peace with Cersei, the White Walkers took down the Wall and now have a dragon of their own. Figure out how to deal with Cersei’s betrayal and the Golden Company, turns out Jon Snow is a secret Targaryen prince.

Maybe Tyrion only really knew how to deal with Cersei. The North was the part he kept screwing up.

Though some of that was his queen’s fault. Damn Daenerys and her falling for a pretty face. If Jon Snow had just remained an ally it wouldn’t have even been a problem. But no, they were in love and wanted to marry each other, creating a dead end in the Targaryen line and potential succession crisis in the future.

Where did love ever get anyone but heartbroken and alone? Even the so-called happy couples ended in death.

A knock pulled him from his bitter thoughts. “Enter,” he called out.

To his surprise, it was Jaime who stepped in. “Jaime, what are you doing here?”

“I’ve heard rumors that the Army of the Dead is to reach us within the week, is it true?”

Tyrion honestly didn’t know. But he also didn’t know if he should share such information with his brother, who’s loyalty still wasn’t certain. Tyrion trusted him, but he knew no one else did. He didn’t want to give anyone reason to kill his brother. Not with the North’s long memory and Jaime having been their bitter enemy and escaped prisoner mere years ago.

Jaime seemed to understand without Tyrion explaining all of this to him. “I know. I’m the enemy and not to be trusted. I’ve seen the way everybody looks at me around here.”

Tyrion noticed that Jaime didn’t seem to want to look at him. It was strange behavior coming from the only person who had always been comfortable around Tyrion. He tried to joke, “Well, the last time you were here it didn’t go so well. Or you do you need to see the boy in the wheeled chair downstairs?”

“Throwing that boy from a window isn’t the worst thing I’ve ever done.” Jaime hesitated. “Lying
to my brother, that’s the worst thing I’ve ever done.”

Tyrion didn’t understand but smirked. “Well, you’re forgiven, if you’re feeling the need to confess before you face death.”

“She wasn’t a whore,” Jaime said softly.

“Who?”

“Tysha.”

Tyrion’s first wife.

Jaime’s eyes met his. “She really was thrilled to marry you. Her heroic lord. It went beyond her wildest dreams. She didn’t care what you looked like or how tall you were. She loved you so.”

Tyrion could see her just as clearly as if it had happened yesterday, Tysha crying and bleeding as he took her for the final time. What had happened to her after that? Tyrion had never bothered to find out. He just assumed she’d died. Tysha, the first woman, possibly the only woman, to ever look at him with love in her eyes. She had looked at him like he was 10 feet tall.

But Jaime had said...”What?” Tyrion gasped out. He’d thought it all a lie. The love she’d shown him a reflection perfected by a practiced whore. He’d thought that the only love he would ever find in this life. The false love of a whore. Tyrion didn’t need this right now. He didn’t need more shit to clean up. He’d had enough.

“Father commanded me to tell you that. I feared him as much as any sane man did. More probably considering how hellish he already made my life.”

“What would you know of hell from Tywin Lannister?” Tyrion’s tone grew dark and furious. “You were the golden child. The favorite. The perfect son.”

Jaime flinched as if he was struck, but he said, “Cersei was the true favorite. You his true heir. You were the only one who could ever keep up with him. I was just...lost.”

“Bullshit,” Tyrion’s venom spewing past his lips. “Feel sorry for yourself all you wish, brother, but you never knew true pain. Never knew what it was to have people flinch at the very sight of you. They may have whispered ‘kingslayer’ behind your back, but you did kill a king. You weren’t called “imp” because of how you were born. To see your father never look upon you with anything other than barely concealed hatred. To watch your entire family watch you die for a crime they knew you didn’t commit with barely contained relief.”

“I wasn’t...”

“But you abandoned me just the same too.”

“I got you out,” Jaime hissed. “And how did you repay me? By killing the only man keeping us all safe.”

Both men wanted to stop. They’d already had this fight. But Tyrion pressed forward, still angry. “He didn’t keep me safe. He never did anything to save me.”

“He went to war for you.”

“He went to war for a Lannister and his pride. Pride – that’s all that ever matter to Tywin
Lannister.”

“He cared about family too,” Jaime said. “Maybe only as a part of himself and his legacy, but he did care. He kept us safe.”

Tyrion shook his head. “I wish Daenerys had burned you away in the lake. What did we gain from what happened after? 500 Lannister men and a warning. Get out.”

“Tyrion…”

“Careful, brother.” He spat the word like a curse, causing Jaime to flinch. “You have no friends this far north. You’re just a body and a sword to throw at the dead.”

Jaime’s head bowed and he left the room, dragging his feet.

Tyrion desperately wanted to get drunk, but he couldn’t afford it. He had too much thinking to do. He needed to be at his sharpest. His feelings didn’t matter. He had told Daenerys to put hers aside, it had been good advice to her and it was just as good for him.

He couldn’t stop the tears though.

Daenerys gritted her teeth as pain shot through her body. It would be worth it, she told herself even as she let a scream escape. “Breathe, your grace,” some nameless midwife told her from between Daenerys’ parted bent legs.

The queen tried but another wave of pain hit her and she screamed again as she pushed again. She could feel something down there give and the midwife informed her that she was almost done. Just one more push.

Nearly exhausted, Daenerys pushed again. This time she felt her child leave her body.

But no scream, no cry came from the babe. She looked down and only saw darkness. Her babe floated to her, carried in a shadow’s arms. The shadow placed the child in her arms. Daenerys cuddled her child to her breast. She could feel no heat, no heartbeat from the child. Another dead babe, her heart screamed and she pulled the child away to look at him or her. To try and save this one as she couldn’t have Rhaego. She looked down at her baby.

Her babe looked at her with solid blue, glowing eyes.

Daenerys woke up. Her fear made her heart race and she sat up. She was alone in her bed. The fire that had burned fiercely when she went to bed had died out while she slept. Daenerys curled her legs to her chest, wrapping her arms around them to hug herself.

One hand drifted to her flat stomach. It wasn’t possible. It couldn’t be. But still the nightmare frightened her.

She wanted Jon. She had stayed out of his bed after the revelation of his parentage. While no one was any closer to a solution to that particular problem, she still thought it best to put some emotional distance between them. Even if she married him, it wasn’t a good idea for them to go into battle madly in love with him. She was likely to make a mistake. Him too. It might get them
and good people killed to let their emotions get the best of them. They had been foolish before, but her good sense had returned.

But tonight, she wanted him more than she cared about good sense. She knew she wouldn’t sleep with the memory of her nightmare haunting her or the knowledge that her dreams sometimes came true.

Jon understood. He had told her about his own strange dreams. Looking back, she realized she should have realized the truth then, but at the time, she had only thought out their mutual understanding had made them perfect for each other. Her dainty feet touched down on the cold stone floor. She rushed to find slippers and a thick robe. She lit a candle and left her room, her Unsullied guards trailing her. Men she trusted to keep their mouths shut.

As she walked down the dark halls, she realized she had only sought out Jon once before. Waiting up for him all night as he ran out was still a bitter memory, even if she knew his reasons now. He had always come to her door. Neither had ever said anything about it, but it seemed right for him to come to her.

Now it seemed right for her to seek him out since she had been stop their late night visits.

She only hoped he didn’t turn her away. Standing outside his door, she realized how much courage he must have needed that night on the ship. He never had confessed just how long he stood outside her door before knocking, but she would no longer tease him about it, as she hesitated before knocking on his great wooden door as well.

He answered almost instantly, belying her guilt at waking him. He looked worried at her presence at his door, and he moved to grab his sword.

She stopped him, by placing her hand on his forearm. Daenerys turned back to dismiss her guards before stepping into Jon’s room. He closed the door, hesitating at the lock before bolting it. Daenerys didn’t stop him, placing her candle on a table.

Now her, she felt ridiculous. She remembered running to Viserys’ room when she’d had nightmares when she was young. At first, he’d indulged and comforted her, but eventually he’d scorned her for her weakness. He’d beaten her the last time she’d come knocking, screaming at her for her weakness. For her failures. Telling her that she was no dragon.

She’d stopped seeking her brother’s comfort after that, learning to comfort herself. It was a lesson she’ had learned well. It made her question why she was here. Had Jon’s love made her weak?

Daenerys didn’t want to think too much on it. “I shouldn’t be here. I’m sorry,” she whispered in a way that reminded her too much of the weak little girl she’d once been.

But Jon was not Viserys, he gently placed his hands on her arms. “You are always welcome in my room. What’s wrong, love?”

It wasn’t much, but Daenerys could feel the tears at her eyes as she collapsed into his arms. She knew she shouldn’t be doing this. It wasn’t fair to him. Not after she had explained that they should be keeping their distance personally. Should just be acting as political and military allies, which mean no more sleeping together. No relying on each other for comfort.

But he did not reject her, pulling her tighter to him as she told him about her dream about their child. She didn’t want to explain how she knew the child was theirs, and he didn’t ask.

He held her without comment until she said, “I’m being weak.”
“Shh,” he whispered to her hair. “You are not weak, my queen. You are one of the strongest women I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting.”

Daenerys pulled back from him. “You didn’t see. I made so many mistakes in Meereen. I’m trying not to repeat them, but sometimes I feel like the young girl who knows nothing that they accuse me of being.”

Jon wiped away a tear from her cheek with his thumb. “I used to complain about my upbringing, the shame of being a bastard. But I was raised by the most honorable man I’ve ever met, tried to follow his example my entire life. I met Aemon Targaryen at the Wall, the wisest man I’ve ever met, whose advice has been invaluable to me many times. Whose example did you follow? Your vicious brother’s? Do you know how amazing you are?”

Daenerys could feel the tears in her eyes, but she didn’t let them fall. She clutched Jon tighter and then looked at his grey eyes. “What did I ever do to deserve you? I worry so often someday this spell you’re under will wear off and you’ll finally see me as the monster I am.”

He smirked. “You’ve been listening to too many rumors, Dany. It was never a spell, no more than love ever is, and you’re no monster, not anymore than me, in any case.”

“I love you, Jon,” Daenerys knew it might not be the right thing to say, to do. Tyrion might condemn her for it, but she didn’t care. She had to say it to him. He had to know.

“I love you too.” He kissed her forehead.

Daenerys felt a peace settle over her, one she wasn’t sure she’d ever felt before. Her head rested against his strong chest. She asked, “Why were you awake?”

Jon swallowed, seemingly embarrassed. “I couldn’t sleep.” His voice lowered, “I can’t sleep very well without you anymore.”

Daenerys smiled, pleased by his confession. She took his hand and guided him to the bed, “Then let us go to bed.” At his raised eyebrow, she clarified, “To sleep.”

“Sleep?” he asked with a playful grin. It looked odd on his face and made Daenerys’ laugh.

She gave him a playful smack. “Just sleep.”

“I’ll take what I can get.” He climbed into bed behind her.

She fell asleep in her beloved’s arms.

The army of First Men joined with the Children of the Forest prepared for battle against the Night King. The two sides didn’t trust each other, not since the First Men learned just how their enemy had come to exist, yet they stood shoulder-to-shoulder to fight their common foe. The Night King’s blue eyes stared at the Men’s commander and the leader for the Children, a man and woman standing side-by-side ready to fight. Preparing to win, no matter the sacrifice necessary, no matter the cost.

Bran could feel the tug, the old man’s voice in his head, “You cannot stay so long. You must not.”
Reluctantly Bran pulled back.

But he’d discovered that he could jump memories without the risk, or so he thought, though each memory could sustain him for less time with each jump. The next was his namesake, Bran the Builder, constructing the Wall. As the foundations were laid and Bran went over the plans to engineer the massive structure, witches (or so they were called) from the Children of the Forest spoke magic enchantments, built into the Wall’s foundations as much as the stone and ice. Bran listened to the ancient language, one lost to time. All magic words often sounded the same to him though, the Children’s chanting sounded much like the Red Woman’s when she brought Jon back, or Daenerys’ Valyrian words as she stepped into flames, he wished he’d bothered to learn more languages when he’d had the chance as a boy in Winterfell.

Nevermind that he was still just a boy in Winterfell.

He shifted again, this time to Azor Ahai holding his sword over his beloved Nissa Nissa, who trusted him so much to open her shirt and bare her breast for him by him merely asking. Even as he aimed the tip at her heart, she didn’t flinch, just connected her gaze with his, firming up his courage. He plunged the blade in and when he pulled it out, it was inflamed.

Again the old man’s warning flashed in his mind, “Do not lose yourself in memory, or you will never return.”

Bran ignored the warning again. He felt like he had all the pieces for a victory but couldn’t see the pattern of how to place them together. He came back to the present to look for the Night King once more.

He was almost surprised when he found the risen dead man and his army. It disoriented him, as he tried to find clues as to the army’s location. They were on the march. The Night King and his dragon mount were on the ground, walking. Bran wondered if blotting out the sun still affected the unnatural demon’s powers.

Bran’s eyes traveled over the the Night King’s army. His old nan hadn’t been lying. The ranks of undead men were filled with monsters not seen for years in Westeros. Giants, huge spiders, a pack of undead direwolves, and many creatures Bran couldn’t name. If he’d been present, he would have shuddered at the sight.

He tried to ignore the monsters, putting them out of his mind. He leapt into the eyes of a bird to get a better view of where they were. He felt his wings beat, felt himself climb up on air.

He looked down upon them until he recognized something. A landmark, one that existed between Last Hearth, one further south than Winterfell. Bran saw now. The Army of the Dead was headed for White Harbor.

Bran returned to the present. He knew all of his brother’s (cousin’s) plans were based around the Army of the Dead attacking Winterfell next. This blow could be devastating, if the northern harbor city fell. They could not afford to be surprised.

He had to tell Jon what he’d seen.

Cold, unblinking blue eyes saw past the darkness, saw through it. The raven had been watching
him, watching them. He had shown the raven what he wanted the seer to see. He then commanded his troops on their true path.

The humans would fall. Humanity was a plague on this world, one he would cure with total annihilation. The darkness would overtake the world again, as it had been at the beginning, and only those reborn would thrive in his new, better world.

Chapter End Notes

I’ll warn you now it’ll probably be a wait for the next chapter too, as it’s more action scenes and I have a big decision to make.
There wasn’t enough food.

It was all that Dragon Queen’s fault. Despite her holier than thou attitude and saying she was for
the people, she was the one who burned the food train. She had started the siege. She was the
reason they starved.

Cersei had been sure that all of King’s Landing knew who to blame, but hungry people didn’t
listen to reason.

It was all the Dragon Queen’s fault. The darkened sky, the lack of food, every problem that the
true queen faced she faced because of the false one. Cersei wouldn’t be surprised if she’d lost her
child due to that bitch having one of her savages put some kind of curse on her womb. She
certainly didn’t trust that dwarf to keep her secret, whatever pretty words he might have said.

The Gold Company was coming, she reassured herself. They would defeat whatever remained of
the Dragon Queen’s army after she helped her northern pet. That damn bastard king was almost as
annoying as his queen. His stupidity had been the only surprise at their last meeting. The
Targaryen must have learned some tricks from one of her Essos bed slaves to keep him so
enchanted with her cunt.

The common people were stupid enough to think the two in love. Cersei knew better. The woman
was a fool if she was in love. Love was poison. Though such a mistake would surly work to
Cersei’s advantage. The Dragon Queen was keeping the wolf in line with sex and false promises.
Cersei could even respect it. She might have tried it herself if not for that damn Stark honor and
their irrational hatred for her family.

Targaryens, Starks, Lannisters - their sigils all predators. The only great families left. (She didn’t
count the weak boy at the Eyrie or the even weaker man still imprisoned at the Twins despite the
Frey’s downfall.) Only the Lannisters had any strength left. The Targaryens were down to a single
girl. The Starks were being led by a bastard. But her father’s children all remained. The Lannister
legacy would live on. She would ensure her dynasty, even if Jaime betrayed her.

Jaime. She shouldn’t even think his name. How could he? He was as bad as the dwarf, leaving her
in her most desperate time of need. Jaime always had to think himself the hero. She was sure he
justified abandoning his pregnant sister behind with some nonsense about honor.

But she knew the truth. She saw the way he looked at that ugly blonde dressed as a knight. She
knew her twin better than he knew himself. He was weak. He had always been weak.

She ignored the pain she’d felt as their child bleed out at the foot of the Iron Throne she’d done so
much, sacrificed so much to sit upon. She wouldn’t acknowledge how she’d cried that night,
clutching a pillow she had wished was Jaime. She wouldn’t admit she’d hadn’t slept well alone in
her large bed. She might let that damn Euron in her bed just to warm it again.

It would keep him under control. Men were all idiots, thinking more with their pricks than their
minds. Despite some people’s jabs, she was still a beauty, she still wielded her most powerful
weapon.
She would show them all.

Cersei was pouring herself a new glass of wine when her Hand entered, his head bowed to his queen. “Your grace, the Iron Bank representative has asked for another meeting. I’m afraid he’s being quite insistent.”

She sighed, irritated. “We’re a bit busy for his nonsense right now. Or has he failed to look out his window during his entire stay here?”

Qyburn nodded. He opened his mouth to reply, but a commotion behind the door stopped him. Tycho Nestoris burst in. He looked furious.

Cersei struggled to hold in her own fury. Who did this banker think he was? She was a queen, the queen. He did not have the right to enter her chambers without her permission. He did not have the right to breathe without her permission.

“What is the meaning of this? I have been requesting an audience with you for days. The Iron Bank remembers its debtors. We are not treated as peasants by any ruler who wishes to keep their throne.” His voice had gained a menace, one that Cersei did not appreciate.

She would do the threatening.

“You’ve been paid,” Cersei set her glass down, leveling the banker with her best stare. “When my throne is secure, you’ll be paid again. We have nothing to discuss.”

“Oh really? And how are you planning to pay us? You’ve taken all the gold to be had in Westeros. The long night is here.” He stepped forward. Qyburn glanced to Cersei, but she wouldn’t be intimidated by a banker. She was a lion. He was a sheep. “I know this enemy you face.” The banker looked out of the window to the darkened sky. “We have stories in Braavos too. Even if you can beat this enemy back, what will be left of this land? You still have winter to deal with even if the night ends. How will you pay us? We do not make losing bets.”

Cersei remembered what she’d seen in that pit. That dead man coming straight at her. It had been a long time since she’d felt fear, but she had felt it then. Before the Hound stopped the creature, she had felt fear. Those things might kill her. Might kill them all. Might destroy her kingdom.

She put it out of her mind. Those heroes would save them all. If she was lucky, they would die in their efforts. Nobly, honorably sacrificing themselves for the greater good of their people. Martyrs who would get songs and stories but no thrones. And they would be happy to do it. Heroes were always such fools. Her father had taught her that much.

Jaime would die with them. Perhaps if she was truly lucky that bastard dwarf as well.

She only needed time. Cersei turned to face her enemy, making herself as tall as she could so that she could look down upon him. “I apologize, Master Nestoris.” She folded her hands. “There’s been so much going on lately, I forget my manners.” She held one hand out in invitation. “Have you been given the full tour of the Red Keep during your time here? It would be a shame for you to go back to Essos without seeing our capital city’s full glory.”

His face stayed firmly unamused. “I don’t want a tour. I’m done being handled. I am a representative of the Iron Bank. I am due respect and I will have it.”

The Mountain stepped in, his massive steps reverberating on the stone floor. The representative noticed, but he still looked unafraid. Fool, Cersei thought. He would deserve what was coming to him.
She put on a simpering smile, one she once used as Robert’s queen to charm simple-minded ladies. “Of course.” Her eyes flashed to her Hand. “Even monarchs fear the might of the Iron Bank.”

Her massive Queensguard placed a hand on the Essos man, making him flinch. She continued, “But the thing about power is that it can be so fleeting, so temperamental. It’s as unpredictable as love. And there always comes a time when it ends.” Cersei’s green eyes connected with the other man’s dark ones. She could see fear in them. Good. He should fear her.

She smiled again, a tight one that crinkled her eyes. “I do agree that we will have some tough financial decisions ahead of us. So I can no longer host guests.” The Mountain, or what was left of him, grabbed the small man by his shoulders. The Queensguard squeezed. “My people are starving. It’s the most prudent financial move. I cannot afford to feed you any longer. Surely you understand?”

Cersei turned away, picking up her goblet once more. Qyburn was wise enough to fill it once more for her. She could hear the man screaming as he was dragged away, “You cannot do this. You cannot! I am a very powerful man.”

Fool, Cersei thought. Powerful men did not have to announce that they were powerful. They just were. Her father never once called himself powerful. No. One look and everyone knew he was. She would be the same.

Yet, she couldn’t quite shut down that twinge of doubt. She had defeated every enemy, had gained the throne she had always wanted, the crown her father had promised her as a child, and yet she knew it was built on a foundation of cracked glass. She could feel the pressure bearing down on her. Cersei moved from one action to the next, constantly reacting. It would be nice to just relax and enjoy her well-earned power for a moment.

But she wasn’t finished. Not yet. Not while the dwarf, Jaime, and that dragon bitch and her pet wolf still lived. She was not finished.

Qyburn stood to the side, looking concerned. “What?” she asked him, not bothering to hide her irritation.

He answered reluctantly. “I’m not sure that was wise, your grace. The Iron Bank is quite powerful.”

Cersei scowled. Who the in the hells did Qyburn think he was? Nobody without her. “You’re the one who wanted more live subjects.” He should be thanking her, and he did as soon as she said that. He was one of the few people she had left. She continued, “If anyone comes asking, we sent him off on his boat when the sun was blotted out. How were we to know he didn’t reach Essos again?”

Qyburn nodded, and then answered her command before she could give it. “I’ll see to it that his ship is sunk without any witnesses.”

Pleased, Cersei silently dismissed her Hand, but for once, he didn’t anticipate her. “These living dead men,” he paused. “The birds say they’ve broken through the Wall.”

Cersei’s blood turned to ice at the thought, at the fear of such monsters lose in Westeros. But she regained herself quickly. “All of our enemies are in the North will face them first. Hopefully, the two sides will destroy each other.”

“You may have been right about the dragon as well,” Qyburn said. “The Dragon Queen lost one of
her so-called children to the enemy already.”

Cersei smiled. And Jaime had been so terrified of that girl and her army and her dragons. She would fall along with all the other rebels up north. Cersei would clean up any mess left over and then she would rule. It was all working out well for her.

Cersei asked, “How is our other matter coming along?”

Her most trusted advisor grinned. “Quite well. I haven’t quite figured out how the flesh manages to continue moving once it’s been separated from the body. But I am making progress.” His eyes darted to the door, clearly he was ready to get back to his experiments.

Feeling generous, Cersei gave him her permission to withdraw.

Jon woke up warm, Daenerys giving off an unnatural heat that he cherished as he’d been cold most of his life. He took a few moments of comfort with her in his bed again, forgetting everything that had happened and just enjoying this brief moment of happiness.

Then he realized what had woke him up, a knocking at the door. He let go of Dany, slowly getting out of the bed. He was dressed only in some sleeping pants. It was cold, but sleeping with Daenerys was like sleeping next to a fire, it got warm quickly. Away from her now, he looked for a shirt or something thicker to cover himself.

The knocking became more urgent. Jon called out, “Coming.” He wondered who it was, so he could dress appropriately. He probably should err on the side of overdressed, but if it was Davos or Tormund, well, they’d seen him in less than his night clothes.

This woke Daenerys up. She rolled over, watching him dress. She bundled the furs closer. “I’m going to buy you a robe. It’s perfect for leaders who get called upon at all hours and need to be presentable in a hurry.”

He remembered her robes and the enjoyment he got from taking them off. “I would never wear it.”

She said nothing in response, looking out the window. “I wonder what time it is.”

Jon followed her gaze, studying the constant darkness. “Impossible to know.”

Dressed, or at least dressed enough, Jon cracked open the door, not wanting to reveal the queen’s presence.

He hadn’t expected his brother. “Bran?”

His brother looked up at him, and Jon was struck by a memory of Bran sneaking into his room one night when he was a boy and frightened by a storm. Robb and their father were away on lordly business, leaving Jon as the oldest man in the family, so Bran had sought him out for protection instead of his mother or sister.

That felt like another lifetime ago.

Bran spoke, “I’ve seen a vision. I need to speak to you now.”
Jon was aware of Daenerys’ gaze on his back. He nodded. “Okay. I’ll get dressed and met you in your room in ten minutes. Is there anyone else who…”

Bran cut him off, forcing his wheeled chair into the door and letting himself into the room. “The queen must know too. Time is of the essence.”

Daenerys, who thankfully was dressed, shot Jon a questioning look at how Bran knew she was here. Jon didn’t know. He closed the door. Sansa was right. Bran’s newfound creepiness of knowing too much was getting annoying.

Bran didn’t either notice or wasn’t bothered by either Jon’s or Daenerys reactions, wheeling in before turning to face Jon. He gave the queen a moment to join them, which Jon could tell annoyed Daenerys to be shut out in favor of him. But she said nothing.

“The Night King is planning to attack White Harbor.”

The room was silent as Jon processed what his brother said. It was impossible. All reports, all of the scouts, had indicated that the Night King and his army were headed straight for him.

But then, Jon had thought the dead rising impossible. Jon had thought the dragons would never come back. Jon had thought a lot of things impossible that he then witnessed become true. Could he really be skeptical about this?

Daenerys had no such hesitations. “Our reports disagree. All of my returned Dothraki have said the army is heading towards us.”

Bran’s dead eyes connect with her vibrant ones. “I know what I saw.”

The queen didn’t give up easily. “Do you? Magic isn’t trustworthy. Only a fool puts all of his faith in such arts.”

“You believe in yourself,” Bran said, reminding Jon of his first meeting with the dragon queen. Jon then realized it was probably intentional, Bran was showing off his new powers once more. He felt a twinge of irritation with the pride and confusion this new brother brought him. Bran continued, “I believe in myself and what I can do. I know what I saw. The Night King marches for White Harbor.”

Daenerys’ eyes darted to Jon and he knew she was looking for his support. But he wasn’t sure he could give it. Bran’s vision made no logical sense, but Jon was standing, breathing, living through powers he didn’t understand. Bran clearly had command of similar powers, was it wise to turn from such a gift?

What if he was right? They couldn’t leave the north’s only real city and harbor to the undead army. It would be too late to help if they waited for a raven.

Jon could feel the weight of both of the people watching, both so expectant of him. He almost longed for the days of being an overlooked shadow. One where Robb received all of the attention while he faded into the background.

But Robb was dead. Jon had to lead. There was no one else. He looked at his brother’s hard, dead eyes and then at Daenerys warm pools of violet. He couldn’t bare to let his brother or the woman he loved down, but he knew what the right solution would be.

“We’ll send a portion of the Dothraki to White Harbor to shore up their defenses, just in case. The army of the dead won’t get there before them, and well, there’s not much we can do about the
dragon any way.”

Jon had guessed right -- neither Bran nor Daenerys looked happy with his proposal. Daenerys asked, “How many are a portion?”

Jon turned to Bran. “Tell me exactly what you saw and how big the army is.”

Bran told his older brother what he’d seen. Both Jon and Daenerys listened carefully. Jon thought for a moment before turning to Daenerys. “We should assemble the small council.”

She nodded. “I agree.” She began to move to the door. “You summon your people and I’ll gather mine.”

Jon, ignoring Bran’s presence, joked, “A queen doing her own summoning? I would think you’d have servants to do that for you.”

Daenerys stopped in the doorway. “Of course not. I’m going to wake up Tyrion and then he can summon everyone while my handmaids prepare me for the day. What’s that Westorsi saying?” She pondered it.

Jon knew the one she meant. “The King shits and the Hand wipes.”

Daenerys grinned. “Yes, now if you excuse me, I have something to dump in Tyrion’s lap.”

She left with a bounce, making Jon laugh out loud. Gods, how he loved that woman.

He turned to get himself ready, but startled when he nearly ran into Bran. He’d forgotten he was here. He felt self-conscious for a moment, worried that he’d seen too much before remembering what Bran was now. He’d seen everything. But for once, Jon thought he could actually see Bran rather than the Three-Eyed Raven looking at him. “Bran?”

“I haven’t heard you laugh since you left for the Wall,” Bran answered. He seemed shocked and a little upset. “I’m not sure I’ve heard anyone laugh since then.”

Jon squatted a bit to make his eyes level with his brother’s. He took the teen’s hand. “There hasn’t been much to laugh about these past few years.” Jon’s mind flooded with the tragedies that seemed so long ago, that truly happened in another life for him, but still nearly overwhelmed him. He pushed forward. “But there’s still some good left. Some laughter left. That’s why we need to survive.”

Bran looked away. “I met your ancestor, you know. Brynden Rivers.”

A Targaryen. Jon took a deep breath. “He’s not my ancestor. I’m not related to any Targaryen bastard.” Bran opened his mouth to speak but Jon cut him off. “I am Ned Stark’s bastard son because that’s what the world needed me to be. It’s what needed me to be then to ensure that Ned kept his head and his promise and it’s what is needed now.” Jon stood. “The world doesn’t need a son of Rhaegar Targaryen, another claim to the Iron Throne, it needs a son of the honorable Ned Stark.” Jon clasped his brother’s shoulder. “It needs the sons of Ned Stark.”

Bran said nothing, but Jon hoped he understood. He looked down at his clothes again. He needed to dress. “Bran, you go and wake our sisters. I’ll handle Davos and the rest once I change.”

Bran nodded, but before wheeling away, he asked, “What if the world needs a son of Rhaegar Targaryen?”
Jon paused in reaching for a fresh tunic. He thought of the man he’d heard biased stories about, but never really knew. A good, golden dragon prince who fell in love with a wild girl from the north despite starting a war. The firstborn son of a monster who became one himself, kidnapping and raping his aunt, beginning a war that killed his grandfather and uncle in such a horrible way.

He knew nothing of that man, either version. He had only ever known one father. Jon began dressing. “If that day comes, I will deal with it then.”

Sansa remembered spending hours braiding her hair. She would count the brush strokes and lightly perfume it, despite Arya’s teasing. It had made her mother happy to see. She had pushed a stray strand back behind her daughter’s ear and assured her, “You’re going to make some lucky lord very happy one day, my dear girl.”

How Sansa longed for the small comforts of her mother now. She knew now she had been a fool to want to go south, see the lands her mother talked so fondly about. She should have stayed with Catelyn. Maybe it would have gotten her killed at the Red Wedding along with her mother and brother, but whenever she thought of Ramsay Bolton, she couldn’t help but wonder if that fate would have been better.

Sansa forced such thoughts from her mind, refocusing on the task at hand. Bran had news again, news that Jon and the queen clearly already knew from their apprehensive yet shared looks. Sansa wondered how bad it would be.

She was horrified to learn that the Night King and his army were marching to White Harbor. Jon and the queen seemed skeptical, but Sansa knew better than to distrust her brother’s visions. He had always been right in the past, why doubt him now?

But the queen was adamant in not trusting in magic and her counselors naturally agreed with her. What frustrated Sansa the most was that Jon seemed to comtemplate to his queen rather than his northern brethren, than his family. If it hadn’t been for the many eyes watching them, Sansa might have reamed Jon for his disbelief.

She knew Jon was in love, which made smart people do stupid things. Cersei had been right about that, at least. Love was a poison, a sweet poison, but a poison nonetheless. Sansa had learned that lesson the hard way.

Jon seemed to gulp it down eagerly. Nevermind the woman was his aunt. Nevermind that she might kill him to secure her throne. He foolishly followed her lead. Sansa never should have let them meet. She should have insisted on an intermediary.

But who would have she sent? A northern lord? Petyr? She hadn’t any better options than Jon himself, which was why she had let him go. She might have been a better choice, but she had been loathe to leave Winterfell again. Many of the hardships of her life happened because she had gone beyond the safety of Winterfell’s walls.

She would not leave it again. Winterfell was her home. Despite her dreams of southern comforts, Sansa Stark had learned the hard way that she was a northern woman to her very bones.

Sansa refocused on the task at hand. Her past didn’t matter, what mattered now was protecting her home. Manderly had been yelling about protecting White Harbor for the last twenty minutes, but
studying the rest of the group, most had tuned him out, consumed by their own thoughts.

She smiled sweetly, putting on the comfortable mask of a simple lady and lightly interrupted his ranting, “Sir Manderly, we all know how important your fair city is and we will not see it fall.” Her eyes glanced to Jon’s in challenge. To her surprise, he didn’t really react to her words.

Surprising her further, he then agreed with her, “I agree, we cannot let White Harbor fall to the dead.” His eyes darted to the queen, who now wore a sour look. Jon continued, “However, with no real proof that any army threatens White Harbor, we can’t panic and send all of our men either. We will send a contingent to reinforce the city’s defenses, just in case. We will also send a raven immediately to warn them of the potential danger.”

Sansa’s look turned sour now. She would never regret Lord Baelish’s death, not after what he did to her, not after how he planned to manipulate her further despite his so-called love for her. But she knew he would have been able to navigate this to his advantage. He would have been able to protect his best interests, despite his lack of titles.

She wondered briefly how the Dragon Queen would have reacted to Peter’s manipulations? Would she have fallen to his charms or would have she had fed him to her dragons? Which would have been better for the north?

Sansa shook such thoughts away. He was not here. She was. “Jon, Bran’s visions…”

But the queen interrupted her, “...are magic and fallible. We cannot trust them.”

Sansa looked to the queen. Why did she have to be so beautiful? “Magic has saved us before and Bran’s information will be key to our victory. Can you actually doubt that?”

Daenerys took a deep breath. “Magic is neither good nor evil. It merely is. It has done many great things, some wonderful such as giving life to my dragons…” She cut herself off, but the look she gave Jon was meaningful. “It has also done many great and terrible things, and this creature we fight possesses a great deal of it. We must never forget that.”

She inhaled. Then turned to Jon. “You have the best understanding of this enemy. What do you think we should do?”

Jon seemed humbled, but his words were strong. They were the words of a king. “We should men for reinforcement, Dothraki and White Harbor men would be best.”

“How many?” she asked.

“10,000, maybe.”

Now Bran was upset. “You need more than that, the army, Jon…”

“The reports don’t line up with what you’re telling me. I can’t send my men off on a wild goose chase.”

“I saw them. That’s all the proof you should need.”

“You’re just a boy, Bran,” Jon dismissed.

Sansa saw that despite everything, Jon still didn’t understand. She spoke up in Bran’s defense, “He’s the three-eyed raven, Jon. You know his power.”
“I do,” his grey eyes met hers. He looked so much like their father. “I do know Bran’s power, but I also know the power of the Night King.” For a moment, he broke off, lost in bad memories. He shook himself out of it and ordered, “Send the raven and figure out which men we’ll be sending.”

Many in the room moved to speak, but the queen stopped them all. “Dismissed.”

Many angry men left the room. It worried Sansa to see. The men would grumble. Tensions were already high with the lack of fighting and the wildlings and the foreigners outnumbering the northmen. She feared that it would all boil over with the right event to trigger it. She worried that this might be that fuse.

Sansa looked to Jon who was doing his usual brooding. The queen stood and her hand clasped Jon’s, her ring standing out against their pale skin. “It was the right thing to do, Jon.” She let go of his hand, but Sansa noticed that Jon tried to keep holding on.

The queen left, her train of people following her, leaving the Starks and Davos alone. Jon’s eyes closed and he inhaled deeply, his head dropping back so that he faced the ceiling. He must know the fight that is coming, Sansa thought. Her mouth set into a line, also prepared for what must be said.

She spoke first, “10,000 won’t be enough. We need to send more men.”

Jon opened his eyes and snapped his neck to look at her. “We can’t send too many or we’ll leave Winterfell unprotected. We’ve lost our home once already, Sansa.”

Sansa bit her lip. She knew. She still had nightmares about the Bolton flag flying over her home. But she couldn’t give in to such fears, not now. “We can’t lose White Harbor either. It’s the biggest city in the north and its port is important.”

Jon nodded but his jaw stayed firm. “That’s why I’m sending men there to reinforce them.”

“What’s why I’m sending men there to reinforce them.”

Jon reminded Bran. “Remember when you wanted to be a knight, remember learning all those battle strategies? It’s not sound strategy to send an army off to counter a feint that could be a trick.”

“Perhaps the magic is deceiving your scouts,” Bran pointed out. “Perhaps we should not trust what they see.”

Jon scowled, but Sansa pressed for a compromise. “Send 20,000 instead. We’d still be protected and White Harbor will be better protected.”
“The queen has agreed to 10,000; I cannot overrule her.”

Sansa could feel her temper rising. She had not bowed to this queen, only Jon had. She had conceded to Jon as her king, but perhaps that had been a mistake. “Daenerys is not queen in the north. She isn’t even queen in the south. She is only queen in some foreign land!”

Jon’s eyes narrowed. “We are not having this argument again. She is our queen. We are pledged to her. It’s done.”

Arya piped up at this, “But is it? We didn’t know about your claim to the throne when that happened. You could be king again.”

Jon lost his temper. “I don’t want to be king. I never did. I don’t want the bloody Iron Throne regardless of who my birth parents were. I have already bent the knee. It’s done. We aren’t talking about this again. Let it go.”

An awkward silence passed over the group at Jon’s outburst. Davos saved them. “Do we need to form a list of who to send?”

Jon, calm again, answered, “The Dothraki and the White Harbor men are making their own lists. I was also going to suggest to Daenerys that she send Jorah with to translate.”

“When are they leaving?” Davos asked.

“As soon as possible,” Jon’s eyes looked out the dark window. Sansa wondered what he was thinking.

Her thoughts were consumed by the fact that she didn’t think 10,000 men would be enough. Jon understood battle tactics better than her, Sansa knew that. But she also could see that more would be needed to ensure the city wouldn’t fall.

She thought of the last battle they’d had, one with the same problem. Perhaps this one had the same solution. After all, the Knights of the Vale were loyal to her, not Jon and not the Dragon Queen.

Sansa began to form a plan. The Knights of the Vale were sworn to her now. They fought for her. She would send them to White Harbor.

Neither Jon nor his queen could stop her.

Daenerys hand caressed Rhaegal’s scales as he cooed in a way he hadn’t since he was a baby. The warmth comforted her as much as her touch comforted him. He had been the son she had always caressed the least, as he didn’t crave affection like Viserion had wanted as a hatchling and had kept his distance from her after she betrayed them both in Meereen. She wished she could take her actions back then, but she couldn’t have let them run free, killing children. She had known so little then.

She knew so little now.

Daenerys felt the tears at all of the mistakes she’d made. Two of her children had died because of
her mistakes, her hand drifted to her stomach and the bump that was getting harder to dismiss and ignore. She could not bare another dead child.

She snatched her hand away. She could not hope for such a thing. She would not. She had to focus all of her energy on the Night King. As if her dragon knew her shift in thoughts, Rhaegal’s coos turned to soft growls.

It warmed Daenerys’ heart to hear. “I miss him too. We will make the Night King pay for what he’s taken from us.”

Viserion, her sweet boy turned into a monster, just like the brother she’d named him after. Daenerys would see the Night King burned for that. Her jaw set. Or she would die in the effort.

Behind her she felt Drogon land before she could hear him. There was no hope in seeing the black shape in the darkness. She’d noticed that both of her children were beginning to practice their stealth. Good, they would need such skills in the upcoming fight.

Her children knew what awaited them. Dragons were intelligent after all, perhaps more than humans. So much about them was a mystery, just like their enemy. Daenerys desperately wished for a way to protect her children, to keep her living miracles safe, but she knew it wasn’t possible. She knew Drogon and Rhaegal would have to fight for the living to win. She knew it, but it didn’t make it easier to put them into danger.

Behind her, Drogon tapped his snout against her back, pushing her slightly. She understood. She would be fighting with them. She would keep them as safe as she could, and they would keep her safe. They would fight for each other. That’s what mothers and children did.

Her dragons sensed someone coming before she did. She knew it wasn’t an enemy as they didn’t tense or curl around her protectively. Her heart sped up. She wasn’t ready to speak with Jon so soon after her weakness in his room, not yet.

It wasn’t Jon. It was Jorah. “Your grace,” he said with a slight bow. She knew he’d come to say good-bye. The Dothraki and the White Harbor men were leaving today to protect the port city.

Daenerys saddened. It felt like all she ever did with Jorah now was exchange good-byes. She didn’t want her old bear to go. But someone had to translate for the Dothraki and she could not spare Missandei (and didn’t want to part her from Grey Worm). Jorah was the obvious choice, being both a man of the North as well as having rode with the Dothraki. Daenerys knew many of his former brethren didn’t trust him, but Jon was careful to send a few of the older knights who remembered Jorah from before his disgrace.

Still, she would miss him by her side. Even when she had sent him away, she always felt safer knowing he was guarding her back. Jorah Mormont would always protect her, even when she didn’t need it.

But perhaps she had Jon for that now.

She wouldn’t allow herself such hopes. Hope was dangerous. It killed more ruthlessly than any army could hope to. Daenerys pushed such thoughts away, focusing on her oldest friend instead, taking his hands into her own. “I’m sorry to see you go again, old friend.”

Jorah seemed a bit touched by her concern, but it didn’t lift the deep sadness she found in his eyes. She had noticed it formed when she saw him again after meeting up with the Dothraki. He had insisted on riding with them rather than riding on the boat, pointing out that none of the riders
would know what to do if they encountered snow.

It was logical enough and she had allowed it, but Daenerys had suspected deeper motives. She knew he did not approve of her relationship with Jon.

She wondered if he’d been informed of Jon’s true parentage and the complete nature of their relationship. She doubted it. They were still keeping it secret and while she had forgiven Jorah, her trust in him would never be total again. Though she knew Jorah must be aware of the recent strain between her and her warden.

Jorah said, “You need to see your troops off, your grace. It will be good for all of the men to see you as a battle commander rather than just a pampered southern queen.”

Daenerys turned away. She knew Jorah was right. She should be planning for war. She should be in meetings, showing the northerners that she was a military leader, not just some spoiled girl who called herself a queen. She knew that, but she just wanted a moment of peace with her babies first. “I’ll go back soon.”

Daenerys also knew that Jon was picking up her slack in her absence, just as she had done for him. She knew that she could trust him to do his best for her and to remain loyal to his queen.

She imagined this was what being married to him would be like, what a real partnership and marriage would be, and her heart longed for it. She wanted to marry him. She wanted to make him hers and she wanted to be his.

But was it a mistake? She’d made too many and she couldn’t afford to make one with him. Jon was the most wonderful man she’d ever met and she loved him dearly, even desperately. She already feared his own stupidity would get him killed; she would not add her own to the mix.

Still, her arms wrapped around herself and she longed for them to be bigger and stronger. She longed for the scent of leather and smoke from the fires all over the grounds. She longed for the scent of him, for his presence. She longed for him so badly. They were the last Targaryens finding each other at the end of the world. It was like something out of story.

She only hoped for a happy ending.

Daenerys sighed and faced her old friend again, pushing thoughts of the man she loved away. Still she could tell by the hurt in Jorah’s eyes that he knew what she’d been thinking of. She wished she felt more guilty for hurting him. But she had never seen him the way he wanted her to, she never would see him that way.

It all might have been easier if she could, but when had easy ever gotten anyone anything worth having?

She told him, “Be careful, Ser Jorah. I do not know if I could bare to lose you.”

Something in him snapped and he leaned forward, grasping her face between his large hands and kissing her fiercely. Daenerys tried to pull away, but he wouldn’t let go. She could hear Drogon’s growls as she pushed Jorah off her.

He looked stunned and the shame came instantly. Daenerys’ face hardened. She wasn’t quite sure where her relationship with Jon stood, but she knew another man’s affections felt wrong to her. She felt as though it was a betrayal to Jon. She would never betray the man she loved. They may be forced to marry others, but she would never enjoy another man’s attention while Jon lived. She coldly ordered, “Leave. Now.”
Jorah didn’t bother hiding the hurt, which annoyed Daenerys even though she knew it wasn’t fair to dismiss his feelings. He’d been one of her most loyal supporters since she met him (aside from informing on her to Varys) and by her side for so long. She just wished he could stop looking at her like she was his. She could only ever see him as an older, almost father figure, and he need to get over his feelings for her. He walked away while Daenerys forced herself to keep her spine straight and looking strong.

As soon as he was out of sight, she turned to Drogon for comfort, gathering her strength before leaving her children to see her men off. Rhaegal came up from behind, exhaling. The warm steam of his breath warmed her in the cold weather. She smiled at him, and touched his snout in comfort as well.

She said good-bye to them and walked to the waiting Dothraki bloodriders. She told them they were going to see their fellows off. They walked to the courtyard and she climbed the stairs to stand next to Jon.

He looked like a king, standing above the men, despite his new title of warden. She almost thought it was a shame that she couldn’t make him her consort for that shallow reason alone. He would look the part.

She turned to look over the men gathered to leave, but she was surprised by the large amount of men gathered. It looked like more than 10,000 men. She questioned Jon, “Am I miscounting or is that more than 10,000?”

Jon scowled, his gaze darting to his sister Sansa. He didn’t reply, but Tyrion answered, his words slurred, “Lady Sansa has decided to send the Knights of the Vale with the rest.”

Daenerys could feel her anger rise, but she contained it to a glare towards Sansa who pointedly ignored her, jaw firm and chin jutting out. She decided to keep it for when they weren’t in public. Though she could feel her jaw tense.

Jon, she noticed, seemed to be dealing with the same frustration. Part of her was happy and proud to know him well enough to be able to tell. She was also proud of him for reining his own Targaryen temper in as well. They couldn’t afford a public fight in leadership. Winterfell was just waiting for something to set it on fire and destroy the tenuous alliances they had built. She could not risk pinning one side against another, not now. The living had to stand together against the dead.

She would be better kind of ruler. She would not let her pride come before the survival of her lands and her peoples. Daenerys swallowed her anger and forced herself to put on the persona of the Dragon Queen. She looked over the men gathered below her, many who had overcome their fear and suspicion of oceans to follow her here, possibly to their death.

She put such thoughts away; she could not let her fear and worry show. She had to be strong and regal.

Jon spoke. Missandei and Jorah translated his words for the Dothraki. “Brothers in arms, I know this may have not been a fight you sought out. I know it’s easier when you’re fighting real, live men. But this is a fight that will be sung about for ages. This is a fight that we must win to survive and each and every one of you will contribute to that. Our brave knights of the Vale, I heard stories of you growing up. Every boy aspired to be one of you. Men of White Harbor, you are true men of the North, men who I’ve grown up with and men I know are honorable and brave. And the Dothraki, even across the great sea, we know of your battle prowess and are honored to fight beside you. Together, we will beat this enemy of legend. We will conquer the Night King and his
army, like the First Men and Children of the Forest did. We will win this fight."

A cheer went up at Jon's words and Daenerys' heart leapt. She was so proud of her king, even if he was her nephew and not her king. She was proud of Jon, of the man he was. She wished she could just stop loving him, but how was that possible when he did things like this? He was everything she'd ever dreamed of, and if it wasn't for her own failings, she would have wedded and bedded him already.

The men marched away and their queen thought of the new numbers. If the Night King attacked Winterfell, they should still be able to hold the fortress, but she was still angry at Lady Stark for deciding something without consulting her queen. Daenerys understood what Sansa had suffered, she had compassion for the woman, but that did not excuse her from her duty. Jon had bent the knee. The North was hers. And she would have to prove that fact.

She just wasn’t sure how. Daenerys was used to old or prejudiced men who she had to force into submission or kill for one too many discretions. She couldn’t do that with Jon’s sister, so she wasn’t sure what her move with the red-headed beauty would be.

For now, she kept her peace, waving her men good-bye and hoping she would see them again.

Daenerys hoped they would beat the Army of the Dead here at Winterfell. If they could stop them here, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. She wished she had listened to Jon in the first place, as it would have been easier to stop them from breaching the Wall.

Just another entry on her long list of regrets.

She saw her men off and thought about what had to be done. She thought about the ditches her Unsullied were digging and her fallen dragon. She thought about Sansa and Arya and the North. She thought about Jon.

When the men were off, Jon turned to her, his doe eyes begging for more time alone with her, but she ignored him (and the pang in her heart), and asked Sansa, “Lady Stark, I wondered if you might want to accompany me in a walk around Winterfell’s outer wall?”

Sansa’s gaze hardened. She was a true north woman, Daenerys thought. Still, she gave a stiff nod and both women began to walk together. Daenerys didn’t turn to see, so she didn’t know for sure, but she sensed that Jon desperately wanted to follow.

Daenerys wouldn’t stop him if he did, she decided. But when she failed to hear the heavy boots tailing after them, she realized he must have left them to have some privacy. Daenerys tried not to feel saddened by the lack of his presence, as she would have to get used to it.

For the good of them both.

The ladies walked in silence. It wasn’t comfortable. Daenerys thought about making small talk, looking out over the walls of Winterfell where she knew their combined forces were digging trenches to prepare for the dead, but she knew that would just bring them to their argument faster. So she remained silent.

Sansa finally broke it, skipping pleasantries and getting right to the point, “I will not apologize for sending the Knights of the Vale away. You may not have seen Bran’s power, but I have and his visions must be taken seriously.”

“I take them seriously,” Daenerys replied. “I also take the magic of the Night King seriously.” She looked up to the black sky to emphasis her point. “Visions are open to interpretation. Too open
sometimes to actually be helpful. I know the power in them but I also see the danger they can have. I must trust our men, who report the Army of the Dead heading this way.”

“What if you’re wrong?” Sansa asked. “If the Night King attacks White Harbor, the North may lose any chance of retreat. Winding up trapped like rats.”

Daenerys knew Lady Stark was right. “Then we made a mistake. I made a mistake. I cannot let fear of making mistakes stop my actions, stop me from ruling.” Daenerys had learned that lesson the hard way. She made mistakes and she tried to learn from them, but she knew this was a fight she couldn’t afford to make a mistake in.

Sansa stopped, forcing Daenerys to stop as well. “Your mistakes will get my family killed. I cannot allow that to happen.”

Daenerys looked into the younger woman’s cold, blue eyes and saw the fear in them. It was buried deep, but she understood all too well what the girl was feeling. Daenerys said, “I know all too well what it is like to have no family, Lady Stark. I spent most of my life without any family, or at least, no family worth having. Your family is mine now, blood of my blood. I will not let them fall, any more than I would allow harm to come to one of my children.”

Sansa nodded, but added, “Jon is king, not you. He should sit the Iron Throne, not you.”

Daenerys folded her hands, clasping them together tight enough to turn them white. “Jon bent the knee. The north has already submitted to me by virtue of its king.”

“I didn’t submit to you,” Sansa’s chin jutted out. “I don’t bow to tyrants.”

Daenerys was taken aback by the harsh words. But then she hardened, Lady Sansa had not met her in Dragonstone, had never faced the cool Dragon Queen as Jon had. No, Daenerys had already fallen for her brother, been desperate for his beloved family to like her. She drew herself up, not that it mattered, as Lady Sansa still towered over her, but she said in her most authoritative voice. “I understand you’ve had bad experiences with queens. I can only imagine what Cersei put you through, and I am not her. I will not hurt you, but I will also not be seen as weak.” Daenerys stepped forward into the younger woman’s space. “If it would please you, I can let the North be independent. I can leave you to your fates. And you can die here. Would you prefer that?”

“No,” Sansa replied.

“Then what is it that you want from me? Antagonizing me does you no good. What are you looking to gain here? I was led to believe that you were smarter than this.”

“I don’t know,” Sansa confessed, before she seemed to realize what she’d said. Her eyes widened at her own words, but then she softened and Daenerys saw for the first time the sweet girl Jon had grown up with. “I don’t know. I just...I spent so long with no control over my own life. I’ve finally gotten it back and I cannot willingly let it go again. I cannot.”

Daenerys nodded, and reached out to touch Sansa’s arm lightly. “I understand that feeling, had it myself. But lashing out at friends is not how to deal with it. Save your anger for those who deserve it, like the Night King or Cersei.”

“Thank you,” Sansa hesitated before adding, “your grace.”

“Now, Lady Stark,” Daenerys let go of Sansa’s arm, “Can you point me in the direction of the crypt?”
Jon entered the crypt he’d hoped to avoid. He never liked it down in the dark dampness. Despite his father’s explanations of how being close with their ancestors could provide strength and guidance, Jon had always found it creepy. Perhaps it had to do with the fact that until recently, Jon’s own ancestry had been cloaked in mystery. Or maybe it was just being in a dark cavern with bones.

Jon didn’t bother softening his footsteps and it wouldn’t have mattered anyway. He found Daenerys quickly, as she was in the first spot he’d looked. She didn’t bother to turn around as he approached.

Jon’s eyes followed the queen’s. He’d never really looked at this statue before, never had any real reason to. He looked at it now.

She had been beautiful -- his mother. He noticed the resemblance to Arya right away. How many years had he longed for a mother, for his mother, and she had been here the whole time? He might have curled up at her feet, crying about how he missed her, longed for her comfort and touch, which might have given him more relief than just crying hidden away by himself in his room or the godswood.

It didn’t matter, Jon thought, tearing his gaze from the statue. Lyanna Stark was long dead, dying at his birth. He looked at Daenerys, a living woman he loved more than anything, who was still here with him. That was where his focus needed to be.

She didn’t look at him as she said, “I’ve noticed she seems to be the only woman down here.”

“Aye, the statues were always for the Lords of Winterfell, but my father,” Jon felt himself hesitate once again on the title that had once been so natural to him. “…insisted.”

Daenerys met his eyes now. “He is your father, you know. No matter who sired you, he raised you.”

“I know.” Jon stared at the statue. “I wonder now…I wonder if his plan had been to take me down here at some point. Show me the statue of my mother and explain everything to me. I think that might be why she has a statue. I always thought it had been commanded by the king. I don’t think I ever really knew him. I know nothing.”

“You knew him.” Daenerys touched his cheek, wiping away a tear Jon hadn’t even noticed. “You knew him, Jon. He’s the man who saved you. You would’ve been killed if you hadn’t been his bastard or at best exiled with me and Viserys.” She looked away. “Which would have been worse.”

“It was cruel to make me a bastard.”

“What choice did he have? You couldn’t be trueborn, but you had to be under his protection. Were you ever starved at Winterfell? Did you need to abandon what little you had to flee assassins? Did your brother…” Daenerys cut herself off.

Jon realized something that could have happened to him in another life. “I could have protected you. If I had been with you. If we’d been family, I might have saved you from his worst cruelties.”

“Oh Viserys may have seen you as a threat and killed you. He had a reason to keep his Targaryen
bride alive but not a son of Rhaegar. You would have only been a threat to him. Your death would be far worse than anything he did to me.” Daenerys gave a sad smile. “I never knew my parents either. Didn’t learn the truth about my father until a few years ago. Still don’t know much about my mother besides she was pretty, dutiful and loved a knight from a minor house.”

Jon smiled, it seemed a constant in his life, whatever his suffering, someone always could top it. Here he was, sad because his father wasn’t perfect, but Ned Stark was no Aerys Targaryen.

Though apparently Aerys Targaryen was his grandfather. Jon hadn’t thought of that. One of his grandfathers burned the other alive.

He really did wish he could go back to not knowing who his parents really were.

Daenerys took her hand away, and Jon could see the queenly mask slipping back on. He hated it. He wanted to speak with Dany, the woman he loved, not Queen Daenerys Targaryen. He had hoped they’d move passed this the other night. Daenerys continued, “I’m naming you my successor. I was planning on including your true name in my will.”

“I don’t want the throne.”

“I need a successor. Who else could it be?” She continued after a pause, looking back at the statue once again, “I don’t know if the Dothraki will follow you. They follow the strong. You may need to prove yourself to them. They’ll split up into their tribes quickly and may go back to Essos, so you’ll have to unite them right away. The Unsullied should follow you, I’ve instructed Grey Worm as much, but please don’t force them if some want to leave. They’ve suffered enough for one lifetime.”

“Stop it. Stop talking like you’re going to die. Stop acting like it’s going to happen.” Jon grabbed Daenerys’ shoulders forcing her to look at him. He could see the wetness filling her eyes and the sight killed him. “You won’t die. Not while I live.”

“I don’t want to die, but it could happen. The last Targaryen who went to war didn’t return, else you wouldn’t have been Jon Snow. We must be prepared.” Her hand moved to his cheek again, her thumb wiping away a tear. “Oh Jon…”

Jon’s eyes met hers. “I don’t want to lose you.” He wasn’t just talking about the war. He knew she was pulling back from him “for the good of their family.” It was bullshit. What did it matter that his true name was different? It wasn’t his real name. Aegon Targaryen wasn’t him. He was Jon Snow.

Daenerys’ hand didn’t move. Jon leaned into it. “I know. I don’t want to lose you either.” Her voice broke.

“Then why?” Anger had seeped into his voice now. “Why all the change of plans?”

Daenerys took her hand away, looking at the statue again. “My brother loved this woman. The price he paid for that was the realm and the rest of our family. We’re the last ones, Jon. We can’t afford to love anymore.”

Jon shook his head. “That’s bullshit. It didn’t matter last night. Nothing has changed.”

“If you really thought that, why did you run off?”

Jon has no answer for that. Damn her for knowing him so well. How did she figure him out so quickly?
Daenerys asked, “Do you know what my biggest fear used to be? That I would never be loved, not beyond being a queen, anyway.” She paused, looking at Jon’s eyes, which didn’t hide the love he felt in the slightest. “Who would ever dare love a dragon?”

He took her hand, and he felt her immediately relax only to stiffen again. It killed him that she felt the need for such restraint. But she didn’t let go as she continued, “It was a riddle, the answer easy and obvious once you know it.” At his look of confusion, she clarified, “Another dragon.”

His features stiffened. “I’m not a dragon. I’m a wolf.”

“You may wear wolf’s clothes, Jon, but you are a dragon underneath all that fur. At least partly.”

He still looked sour at her declaration. He shook his head, “Despite my blood, you are still the last dragon, Daenerys Targaryen. And you cannot die, for your children would be inconsolable.”

Which was true, even if Jon had Valyrian blood, he doubted he would be able to control Drogon or Rhaegal enough to stop them from burning the countryside down if they lost their mother. He shivered at the thought of two wild dragons in Westeros.

The thought seemed to give Daenerys pause as well. Her voice cracked as she answered, “That’s why I must plan for the future. We should visit the dragons more, maybe if they become more familiar with you…”

“Damn it,” Jon whirled Daenerys again so he could look into her eyes. She was trembling and Jon could feel himself shaking as well. He had too much emotion for this woman. “Do you really think that I will survive your death, Dany? Do really think I wouldn’t have already died trying to protect you?”

“Jon, love makes us weak, we cannot…”

Jon cut her off, tired of her excuses. “Love is all that matters now. The world is ending, Daenerys. We’ve spent our lives looking for each other. We could die tomorrow. What does the rest of it matter?”

“This is not easy for me. I love you too. I will always love you, but it’s what’s best for our family. I cannot just do whatever I want.” Her voice cracked and he wanted to gather her into his arms, but he resisted the urge to continue looking at her. “This how our relationship should have been from the start.”

He couldn’t argue against anything she said with anything but emotion, which was the most frustrating thing of all. He let go of her so he could pace. He said, “I’ll regret this. I will regret not loving you every second I can before the end. And if I died tomorrow, I think you’d feel the same.”

She looked as if he’d struck her. Jon wasn’t sure he cared. He didn’t want to hurt her, but his pain was strong enough that he wanted to lash out. She was killing him, more thoroughly than the Night King could ever wish to.

Her voice was weaker now, and Jon felt hope as he saw her look at him once more with the same longing he’d seen as she’d said good-bye to him on Dragonstone. He had thought it was just his overactive imagination then, but now he knew. He knew she was trying to force her true feelings away to be the queen the realm needed. “We can’t. It’ll only make it harder to let go later.”

Jon stopped pacing and used his hand to softly wipe away one of Daenerys tears with the pad of his thumb. “What if there isn’t a later?”
This time Daenerys didn’t have an answer to that.

Jon pressed, stepping forward, taking her in his arms the way he’d wanted since seeing her alone in here. “We can argue about the politics later. We can decide on marriage and thrones and successions and all that crap after the war is won. What we can’t do is get back our time together.” He held her face, forcing her to look at him. “Humans were made to love. The Others are coming to kill us all. Nothing else matters now. Let me love you, Daenerys.”

To his surprise, she was the one who captured his lips. Jon opened his mouth and Daenerys’ tongue dueled with his. He groaned; he missed this so much. It had only been a week since they were together last, but it felt like a year. He walked her back, to press her against the wall, and she let him, wrapping her leg around his hip to pull him closer.

He wanted to tell her that he understood. Jon sometimes feared his love for Daenerys as well. He’d loved before, he loved his family, he loved his men, and he’d loved a wildling woman, but it had never been so all-consuming. It had never frightened him with its intensity. He pulled away to confess his thoughts, but Daenerys chased him, forcing his lips back to hers.

Jon went willingly, eagerly. He could feel himself hardened and despite the layers of clothes between them, he thrust into her. She moaned in his mouth in response, which just made him want her more.

Just as he began letting his hand work her stays, he heard the sound of footsteps coming in behind him. Daenerys must have heard them too, for she pushed him back slightly so she could put her feet on the ground again.

Jon was livid, never wanting to kill anyone more than whoever had dared disrupt them. He had been so close. He knew he’d almost convinced Daenerys to return to him, damn the consequences. He could see her walls rebuilding as she straightened out her skirts, and he nearly cursed aloud. Damn whoever dared interrupt them.

It had been a boy, someone whose name Jon couldn’t remember in his distracted and furious state. The boy must have been somewhat clever though, as he seemed to understand his warden’s mood. He said quickly, “My lord, you’re needed in the Great Hall.”

Jon nodded and the boy scampered away. Daenerys was breathing normally again and was put together once more.

Damn whatever was dragging him away, Jon thought again.

“Go see to your people,” she said, voice shaky. “That’s what’s important, Jon Snow.” She stopped and bit her lip before she continued, breaking his heart a little with her words. “Not us, not our feelings.” She sighed and looked at Lyanna’s statue again. “It doesn’t matter. Not really.”

He was angry again and spit out, “No, it doesn’t.” She winced at his words and he tried not to care. He wondered if she was lying. He certainly was. It mattered. It mattered far too much. But she was right, the romance between two people couldn’t be more important than the fate of the world. It was part of what attracted Jon to her. Her honor - her goodness - her ability to put aside personal feelings for the greater good. To care so much for her people that her own happiness could be put aside.

Though a little more selfishness from one (or both) of them would be nice right now.
Jon followed the boy’s path out to attend to his duty.

Jon wanted to wring the necks of the two lords in front of him. This, this was the reason he’d been pulled away from Daenerys’ lips.

“...demand justice. I demand you fix this and that boy.” The red faced Lord Magnar pointed at the young man who was hiding behind his father’s cloak.

Jon did not care about any of this. It was not important. What did he care about a young man trying to get his rocks off with a young lady? It was the end of the world, time to find comfort wherever and whenever it could be found.

Jon sighed, thinking of Daenerys again, what he should be doing with her right now instead of listening to this dispute. He spoke for the first time since entering the chamber, “Did you really need me for this? Couldn’t figure it out on your own?”

The red-faced lord who’d found the other lord’s son in his daughter’s bed, yelled, “This boy took my daughter’s virtue and her honor. I demand justice.”

“That was gone before I got there,” the boy grumbled. His father smacked him for that.

Jon looked at the girl, who was trying to look as small as possible behind her father, in his gentlest voice he asked, “Did he force himself on you? Are you accusing rape?”

“No, your grace,” she answered softly.

Jon turned to the boy. “The honorable thing to do is to marry her.”

“It was just a romp. She’s not pregnant.”

Jon looked to the lords. “I’m not going to force this.”

“I want justice!” Lord Magnar yelled again.

“It’s war.” Jon calmly explained. “Men seek out the baser comforts of women in these times. It’s only natural.” Jon had learned a lot during his time on the Wall. He found out that men were never going to be as honorable as you wanted them to be. As Lord Commander, he learned you had to value some rules over others. As Aemon had said, “If we cut off the heads of every man who laid with a woman on the Wall; the Wall would be guarded by headless men.”

Jon looked at each face in the room. “Your daughter’s honor will be safe, for no one in this room will speak of this.” He glared at the boy and his lord father, who both nodded.

Lord Magnar stormed out, still not satisfied Jon knew, his daughter trailing behind with her head bowed. If the lord had just ordered the boy away, no one would have needed to learn about his daughter’s reputation.

Jon looked to the boy. “No more lord’s daughters. Next time pay a whore. And you are going to have to marry her if she winds up with child.”

“If she’s pregnant, it’s not mine. He walked in before I got to finish.”
Lord Dustin whacked his son’s head again. “You cannot actually be that stupid.”

Jon walked out. Because of this nonsense, he hadn’t gotten to finish either. He’d been so close to getting Daenerys back. He’d almost had her. He wanted to find her, finish what they started, but he was sure she’d run and her walls were back up again, reinforced this time.

He wanted to kill someone. He strode to the courtyard. Woe to the man or woman he found for a sparring partner today.

Jaime had known the Targaryens; he’d seen their best in a prince, their worst in a king; and their ugliest worn by a queen. The last Targaryen was all of them and none of them. He was still trying to figure out what to make of her. Daenerys Stormborn. She was pretty and proud, just like every Targaryen. Just like every Targaryen Jaime had ever known, she’d rather burn the world than live in one she didn’t rule.

She was a lot Cersei in that regard. It was part of the reason, he’d always believed and listened to his sister when she called their family the new Targaryens. They had many similarities.

Jaime tried to push thoughts of family away, still unable to forget the look of betrayal Tyrion had given him at learning the truth.

He didn’t want to think about that. Tyrion had betrayed him as well. He was expected to just forgive Tyrion for killing their father? Leaving their family vulnerable to attack? It had killed his son and daughter. He was supposed to forgive that, but Tyrion could be pissed about something that happened 20 fucking years ago? That was fair, but then Tyrion had always been a greedy bastard.

Just like Cersei. And their father. Maybe it was just a Lannister trait. To ask for everything and then just a bit more.

“Where did you get that?” Jaime recognized the voice. The man yelling was from his army. Jaime sighed.

When he heard the response, he knew he would have to intervene. He didn’t know what the other man was saying, but it was one of those queen’s savages. Jaime didn’t run, but rushed to place himself between the two men. In the time it took him to get there, a crowd had gathered, one full of angry, restless faces.

Jaime worried. He didn’t want this minor incident to stir up the tension that had been brewing between the many different faction gathered within the walls of Winterfell. They had a war coming; they couldn’t afford to be fighting each other.

“Hey,” he yelled at his man, holding up his good hand to keep the man back from the queen’s savage. “Hey, stop. We’ll have fighting soon enough where we’ll need every man.”

The Lannister soldier threw Jaime off him. “When? When? Where is this great army you damned nobles are so fucking afraid of? I’ve been dragged across this whole fucking continent because of your fucking family. And for what? I should be at home. Protecting my own from winter.”

A mummer of agreement filtered through the men. Jaime knew he had to stop this now. Bad
morale could defeat them before the Army of the Dead even had a chance. He knew the perils of men ready for a fight sitting around. The former kingsguard almost wished the dead would just attack so that their army wouldn’t destroy itself. He mustered up all the charm he’d been told he possessed and said, “I understand that you’re all tired and you want to go home. We’ve all sacrificed so much to get here,” Jaime remembered Joffrey and Myrcella’s bloodied faces from the poison that killed them as he could only hold them. He remembered the bloody mass of pulp that had once been sweet Tommen’s head. “Too much.” His phantom fingers on his right hand flexed. Too much.

The men said nothing, too fearful, perhaps of openly speaking against the Kingslayer? But Jaime could see it on their faces nevertheless, “What do you know of sacrifice?”

“I know none of you ever cared who ever sat on the Iron Throne. You never cared about the wars we dragged you into for these past eight years. You just wanted to stay home, fuck your wives and live your lives. But this fight...it’s not about Lannisters or Starks or even Targaryens.”

Jaime looked at his men, all tired, all desperate to go home, all scared.

Guttural noises from behind him caused Jaime to remember the Dothraki were still here. He turned to find the group of wizened warriors glaring at him. He refused to be intimidated. He was Jaime Fucking Lannister, one of the greatest swordsmen of his generation, a Kingsguard since he was old enough to shave. He was not going to let anyone push him around. Jaime put on a smirk and asked, “I don’t suppose any of you speak the common tongue?”

One of the men answered in their strange language. Jaime didn’t understand a word of it, but from the man’s pointing and furious tone, he guessed it wasn’t, “No problem here. I’ll just walk away now.”

Brienne of Tarth stepped forward, her fingers dancing upon the hilt of her sword. She nodded to Jaime. He grinned at the woman he respected, happy to have at least one ally up north. Her chin jutted out as she announced, “Winterfell is to be a refuge for all our forces. Lady Sansa wouldn’t like to see any fighting breaking out.”

The Dothraki clearly didn’t understand. One kept growling something, while another held his arm, saying something about “khaleesi.” Jaime wished he’d bother learning another language. Even Valyrian might have been helpful in this situation.

One of the riders pulled out their curved sword, so a few of the Lannister men pulled out theirs. The arguing was beginning to turn to yelling. Jaime kept attempting to calm down his men again, but it was useless without being able to talk to the Dothraki.

“Nakho,” someone yelled out. The crowd parted to show a very angry Jon Snow. He glared at Jaime. “What is going on here?”

Jaime was more surprised (and a little impressed) that Jon spoke Dothraki. “You speak their language?” One of the Dothraki said something. “What did he say?”

“No idea,” Jon shrugged. “I know about 20 words. So we’re going to use up my Dothraki vocabulary very quickly. That’s why I was asking you.”

Like a cat, that sister of his appeared at the former king’s shoulder. It unnerved Jaime. He hadn’t even heard her approach. Still, he didn’t let his feelings show on his face, adapting a cocky smirk. “Your queen’s savages are harassing my men.”
Jon crossed his arms. “Our queen, you mean.”

Jaime’s smirk grew into a grin. “Oh, I think she’s more your queen than anyone’s.”

Hardened northern warrior or not, the younger man’s cheeks stained at the implication. Though Jaime wasn’t sure if it was a blush of embarrassment or a flush of anger. Whatever his feelings were, he swallowed them, turning to the Dothraki. He licked his lips and then attempted to speak to the horsemen. “Um…Nakho…” then he mimed fighting.

The Dothraki looked confused and replied in their foreign tongue, which no one understood. Jaime scoffed, “This is great. We’re going to war with a bunch of people we don’t understand and who don’t understand us. What a wonderful army you’ve assembled here, Lord Snow.”

Jon glared. “I’m sorry, Ser Lannister. Perhaps your 100 men would like to fight alone?”

Arya stepped in to talk with the Dothraki. Jaime wasn’t sure, he’d never much cared for languages, but he was pretty sure she was speaking Valyrian. The men seemed to understand her at least, but could apparently only respond in their tongue.

One of the Lannister men, yelled out frustrated, “Perhaps you cunts should just go back home if you can’t even learn the common tongue!”

Jaime didn’t know who’d said that, but turned to glare at all of his men. Snow was right, they couldn’t face this enemy alone. The former kingsguard turned back to the lord. “So what’s your plan here, commander? I would hope you have something planned before the fighting actually starts. Or we’ll all end up killing each other before those undead things have a chance to.”

Jon looked deep in thought when the sound of a bell ringing cried out in the dark. Jaime looked in the direction of the noise, squinting despite of the darkness. “What does that mean?”

“It means either someone just got married or we’re under attack.” Jon strode forward, yelling out, “Archers to the walls!”

The Dothraki, despite not understanding, seemed to get that a battle was coming, as they backed off from the Lannister men. The entire keep seemed to come alive, people peeking out their heads at the noise, looking up to the darkened sky.

That made Jaime remember, the dragon. They would be fighting the undead dragon.

He remembered the last battle, the horrors of men being burned alive in an instant. Or even worse, when they lingered on, screaming in agony. He would never forget it - the smell of burning flesh, the sound of a dragon’s roar.

And he was going out to face another one. Bronn was right, dragons should be when any sane man drew the line.

But Brienne looked to him, her big blue eyes shining, “Let’s go, kingslayer.” She said with a shy smile that was so charming to see.

Jaime grinned back at her. “After you, wench.” She ran off in the same direction Jon Snow and his sister had run off in.

Jaime would do the honorable thing. Perhaps it would get him killed, but at least, he would have one more deed to right in that damned book in the Red Keep.
“Fought in the Great War against the Night King and his Army of the Dead.”

It might be the only deed he’d ever done worth writing down. He turned to assign his men to posts and ran after the rest of the men to the edge of the walls where the attack seemed to be coming from.

The Battle of Winterfell had begun.

Chapter End Notes

It happened again. This was one chapter that is now two. Seriously writing for this fandom has made me so much more sympathetic to why it takes George so damn long to write these fucking things. Once again, sorry about the wait, and the next chapter will hopefully arrive a little quicker.

Dothraki translation:
Nakho = Stop
Fallen

Chapter Summary

It was later called the Battle of Winterfell, but the men and women who were there felt that name didn’t do what happened there justice. Days, weeks, of hard non-stop fighting wasn’t a battle, it was something else.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The darkness that covered the land combined with the silence that overtakes a place prior to a battle combined into an eerie atmosphere. The archers on the wall clutched their bows as the entire army held their collective breaths.

Jon had prepared Winterfell as best he could. He had had pikes erected, trenches dug, and men guarding at all hours. He had catapults ready and men manning the walls to shoot down a dragon. He felt prepared for this fight, but he just wished he knew what was coming, what whoever lit that beacon saw.

The weight of Longclaw in his hand was a familiar comfort. Jon knew the silence he heard now was false, behind him, men were preparing to fight. Dothraki were finding their horses in their camps, the Unsullied were preparing to hold against whatever was coming, and Daenerys was calling her dragons.

Daenerys. Jon’s hand gripped his sword tighter. He would die before he’d let this army hurt her. He would fight his damnedest to survive first though. She wanted him to live and that was enough reason for him to want it too.

He waited to hear the army coming. Dead or not, there would be noise of the shuffling feet crossing the snow covered land. A chill in the air blew in, signalling that the White Walkers, possibly even the Night King were near. Jon shivered as his eyes looked out into the darkness. A few bonfires were going outside of the walls in an attempt to show any attacks, but Jon knew it wouldn’t take much for the threats to stay cloaked in darkness. It also didn’t help that he had to keep glancing upward, in case the Night King flew in on his new dragon.

Jon had assumed, along with everyone else, that the attack would begin with the dragon. After All, that was how the Night King had began his attack on Last Hearth. And it made sense. There was little sense in holding back your greatest weapon when retreat would be possible. The Night King would be attacking their defenses to find weak points, figuring out his best strategy to conquer his enemies.

That’s how Jon would do it. And whatever else the Night King was, he didn’t seem a fool.

A scream echoed in the distance. Several more screams joined the first. No one could see what was causing the scream and Jon tried to figure out the direction they were coming from, but he recognized that his men were nervous. They shuffled on their feet and their arms shook. They needed confidence more than Jon needed to know where the enemy was coming from.
Men, he though ruefully. The one who stood next to him was a boy who couldn’t be older than 13.
He would think on that later. Jon shouted, “Hold steady lads. Let the enemy come to you. Wait until you can see them so that your arrows land.”

He did not need to tell them that they ammunition wasn’t something their army had an endless supply of. Jon thought about how he would probably have to send people out into the darkness during the breaks of battle to collect used arrows and burn the bodies of the dead to keep them dead. He began to pace on the walls of Winterfell, ready for the enemy to come. He never enjoyed killing, but his blood called out for a fight. He was good at it. Sometimes he thought it might be what he was born to do.

He pushed those thoughts away as well. Jon didn’t want to think about his birth and the complications that it had brought him. He glanced up, trying to see the pale dragon with blue flames that the Night King now rode. He then looked out into the darkness, his eyes searching for the horrors that had made someone scream only moments before.

Jon spotted movement in the darkness but couldn’t identify what it was. He still called out. “Archers, aim left!” The men and women moved as one, inflamed arrow points now facing left, much to Jon’s pride. At least he’d trained his people. They would fight and they would fight well.

He breathed. In and out. His eyes strained to see movement again, every now and again glancing right and center as to not be caught unaware. But he saw nothing.

In and out. Where were those undead creatures in this unnatural darkness?

Jon heard the screams on the wall before he saw anything. He moved to follow it, but then he saw a leg fold over in front of him. A hairy leg of a huge spider. No wonder he’d heard nothing as the giant beasts had climbed the walls. The ice spider in front of him pulled itself up threatening the boy whose bow and arrow was now shaking so badly, Jon thought it would be impossible for him to loose it.

The boy tried anyway, but the arrow fell to the ground, its flame going out. The spider lurched forward its fangs sinking into the boy’s throat, killing him. Jon rushed forward, swinging Longclaw with a yell, avenging a child who never should have had to fight to begin with. He lobbed off the spiders two front legs, causing the monster to rear back with something like a screech of pain.

Arrows now found their mark and the spider caught fire as Jon forced the creature back, stabbing and hacking at it. He called out to the catapults behind him, “Now, start firing now.”

The spider tried to get at Jon with its fangs, but he put his sword between him and the beast’s face, keeping it back. A half dozen blue eyes gazed at Jon and he noticed was no live venom dripping from this living dead creature. Jon steadied his stance and with all of his might pushed, forcing the spider back and off the wall.

Jon could see over the wall now in flashes from the balls of fire being tossed by the catapults behind him. He could see the undead army the Night King had sent, full of undead horrors of creature found beyond the wall -- ice spiders, giants, direwolves and such. Things the men and women of the North would only know of in stories. Jon sneered at the cheap scare tactic. The people of the North wouldn’t scare so easily.

Jon ordered the vats of boiling oil to be poured. He wasn’t sure that it would actually harm the undead army and it wouldn’t stop it, but it might slow it down. Make it harder for the creatures to climb the walls. Jon spotted a few gaps were the spiders had been let into Winterfell. The Unsullied
had one cornered, stabbing it in perfect succession with their dragonglass spears. Jon was confident that Grey Worm and his men could hand the beasts that got past the wall’s defenses, but he didn’t want to overwhelm the Unsullied.

As best as he could, Jon supervised the oil being readied. He fought off creatures as he came across them, as he attempted to visit each position, wanting to be sure that nothing was going wrong. Jon wondered where the dragons were, Daenerys’ and the Night King’s. It was a thought that lurked in the back of his mind. He wanted Daenerys to show up but also wanted her safe. He didn’t want the Night King to show up, but every second he was away was one Jon worried about when the fucker would show his face.

A leg appeared in Jon’s path and he whipped to the right just in time to slice at the pincers coming for his face. The giant spider tried to get around Jon’s sword, but Jon didn’t allow the beast any closer. The fangs came within inches of his face, but Jon continued to push the beast back. He swept a leg towards one of the creature’s front legs, forcing it down so that he could swing Longclaw around and plunge it into the spider’s brains. The legs gave a final spasm and then Jon pulled his sword back out and moved on.

The oil was ready. The strongest men lifted the pots to place them on the parapets of Winterfell. Jon looked out into the darkness trying to see what else was out there, coming for them, trying to decide if they should wait on the next wave of monsters or go now.

One of the men called out to him, “Do we pour now, commander?”

Jon felt the weight of responsibility on his shoulders. A responsibility he’d never wanted, one he wished he could set aside so often. He looked at the men looking to him and decided. “Wait until you hear the roar of dragons then pour away.”

The commander rushed into the direction of a new commotion, new sounds of screaming and terror. He briefly glanced up and wondered where Daenerys was, what was taking so long?

New horrors and terrors filled his mind. Daenerys getting attacked by the monsters overrunning Winterfell. Daenerys screaming, all alone as she waited for her sons who weren’t arriving fast enough. Daenerys dying.

No. He could not let such worries consume him or he would never be able to fight. He began to rush down the stairs to rejoin the fight elsewhere, but someone called from above.

“Sire, we can see some massive beasts. They are about to rush the gates! I don’t think it’ll hold ‘em!”

Jon heard the sounds of trumpets running their way and remembered the mammoths the wildlings had tried to use to bring down the gates of the Wall. The Wall hadn’t held such beasts back without massive sacrifice and he feared Winterfell would fare even worse. He ran back up the stairs to see what his men saw.

There they were, massive mammoths running as fast as they could towards the gates of Winterfell. Jon could see their blue eyes even in the darkness. He called out, “Forget what I said before, prepare to drop the oil now.” He turned to the catapults, yelling as loud as he could, “Aim towards the gates. Bring down those beasts!”

The oil was spilled as he ordered, but the catapults couldn’t be moved so quickly. Jon watched, hoping the oil would at least slow the massive beasts down, cause them to slip.
But it barely slowed them.

Jon braced himself for the coming assault. He would fight to his last breath to save his home and his family.

That’s when he heard the dragon roar above him.

Jaime flinched at the screech of the dragon coming from behind him. He suspected he would always do that after the carnage he’d watched that beast inflict on his men. He didn’t let the fear stop him though, he brought Widow’s Wail down on another creature, using his Valyrian sword, forged from the Starks’ Ice, to protect Winterfell.

It was a direwolf attacking him. Jaime rolled his eyes. Of course it was a fucking direwolf. His life was full of fucking ironies. He was fighting on the side of the Targaryen queen whose father he’d killed and the bastard son of the family he’d helped damn near wipe out. Of course he’d have to fight its sigil creature.

He should be grateful it wasn’t a fucking lion.

The wolf bared its teeth growling at him as Jaime readjusted his grip on his sword. It didn’t quite feel natural in his left hand, not the way it had in his right, but he knew it wasn’t completely useless the way it had once been either. He just hoped it would be good enough.

The unnatural blue eyes glowed at him. Jaime had never liked killing men, but he was discovering that he much preferred that nasty business to these unnatural creatures. Men were meant to stay dead, were meant to bleed and groan as they died, not like these things. The wolf swiped a paw at him and Jaime ducked it. He attempted to get his sword under the creature’s armpit, but the wolf ducked away before he could drive it in.

The two predators circled each other. The wolf attacked first and Jaime noted the jump was sloppy. He wondered if dying and coming back to life made the animals lose that hunter instinct. He sidestepped the beast, slashing upwards as he moved.

If the beast had been alive, it would be bleeding. But as was, the creature merely now had a gash in it. Jaime hated the sight. Living things bled. It was messy, but it was warm and right. The unnatural cold coming off the wolf was wrong. It was all wrong.

The wolf lunged forward, its jaws snapping at him. Jaime blocked the teeth with his golden hand. When the wolf attempted to smack Jaime with its massive paw, Jaime brought up his sword to cut off the appendage off.

Such a wound would usually make any creature howl in pain (as Jaime himself had done when his right hand was taken from him), but the wolf didn’t react over, merely trying harder to bite through the gold.

Jaime brought his Valyrian steel down into the wolf’s skull. He watched the light fade from the wolf’s eyes; it was the only familiar thing in such a fight. How many times had he seen a man’s life fade from him? He pushed the beast off of him, grateful he didn’t have to clean his sword.

He heard another roar from the sky and watched as flames burst forth from the big black dragon.
into the enemy.

It was truly an awesome sight, watching the dragon burn their enemies. Lighting up the darkness that had consumed the world. Jaime still felt the horror of the previous battle when it had been his army, his men on the wrong end of such horrors, but watching one ancient magic fight another -- it was the kind of sight that no man ever thought to see, but couldn’t help but be a bit humbled and amazed by.

“Sir,” one of the Lannister men called out to him. “Look out!”

Jaime didn’t know what the man was speaking up, but looked up to where the man was looking. He didn’t register what he was seeing, but his warrior’s instincts understood he had to get out of the way, and he rolled to his left.

A charred body of a spider now rested where he’d been standing. Jaime’s mind finally caught up with what happened as he watched the green dragon roar, its claws open from the bodies it’d just dropped as it went to catch and burn more.

Jaime, not wanting to show the fear of the near miss, sneered, “The queen could learn to control her beasts a bit better.”

He was surprised by the answer, “I would keep that to yourself. I prefer the queen and her beasts to stay here, and you might offend her with such thoughts.”

Jaime grinned at the sight of Brienne of Tarth, here to watch his back. They had lost each other at the start of battle, but he would want no other to fight beside him. She didn’t return the smile, but he could tell she was just as pleased to see him. Her eyes lifted, lighted a bit more. He was proud of himself for being able read her so well.

He took position at her back, twirling his sword as a new beast, one of the massive spiders, began to scurry towards him. He threw over his shoulder, “You know, I was right about honor being overrated. If you had turned down my gift of Oathkeeper, you’d be fighting with one of those rickity knifes right now.”

“Focus, Sir Lannister,” Brienne said.

“Of course, we want to impress your new wildling boyfriend, don’t we?”

Jaime couldn’t see it, but he could feel Brienne’s eye roll. He laughed as he attacked the massive spider, finally remembering the joy he’d once found in the midst of battle.

She waited for the servants to fill the tub. It was hard to get it the scalding hot temperature she liked it here in the cold of winter, but the men were doing their best and she appreciated their efforts. When the last bucket was empty she offered a smile at the man’s nervous little bow.

Daenerys had thought about going back to the springs Jon had shown her, but she knew it take long for her to get lost in the memories of that night with him. She couldn’t afford such distractions now, so she went over to the edge of the tub and held her hand over it.

It was warm, probably not quite hot enough to suit her tastes, but it was fine. Daenerys stood and
began to disrobe when a knock came to the door.

One of her handmaids went to answer it. Jon stood behind it. He seemed reluctant to enter, so she called out permission and in the next breath dismissed her maids.

When the door closed, Daenerys dropped her robe and got into the tub. Jon coughed. “I can wait until after your bath, your grace.”

His eyes were looking away, which made Daenerys smile. The man had had his tongue on most of her skin, yet he could still be such a prude. “It’s fine, Jon. I’ve got nothing you haven’t seen already.”

It was strange how their different backgrounds showed themselves sometimes. She had been raised in an environment where nudity wasn’t anything special. Dresses that showed women’s breasts were the traditional and popular style, not the exception. Tyrion’s warnings of the prudish north, on the other hand, weren’t unfounded. She looked down at her body, her hair was returning around her slit, as she hadn’t the time to wax and her belly was rounded in a fashion that she was finding harder each day to dismiss as the effects of stress.

She sank into the water and let its warmth comfort her, soothe her aches and begin to remove the grim that seemed to be a part of her these days. It had been exhausting, battling the Night King’s army. He had never let up the attack as his men and his monsters needed no food, no rest.

They kept waiting for the king and his dragon to appear, but as it was, they may not need to. The army of the dead was wearing down the army of the living, just by stubborn relentlessness. Daenerys found sleep when she could, knowing rest was important, knowing Drogon and Rhaegal needed it as much as she did despite their stubbornness to fight, but looking at Jon, she couldn’t help but notice the dark bags under his eyes. She frowned. “When is that last time you slept, my lord?”

Jon waved a hand dismissively. “The army needs me. I can sleep when I’m dead.”

Daenerys frown deepened. “You’re only a man, Jon. You need rest, just as any of us.”

Jon ignored her worry, kneeling down by the tub. If it had been larger, she would have invited him in with her. As it was, she was tempted to do it any how. Without discussing it, Jon rolled up his sleeves and Daenerys handed him a cloth. He began washing her back, helping her bathe. His touch was still so gentle. It was easy to forget when she’d seen him as little but a warrior as of late.

It was a comfort to feel his touch again, and Daenerys closed her eyes to the feeling.

But Jon never let his duty fall away for long. She loved that about him, but wished the moment of peace could’ve lasted just a bit longer. He said, “I think the Night King will attack the damn gates again soon. I’ve had them reinforced as best we can, but I’m not sure it will hold against whatever the Night King throws at them.”

The timbre of Jon’s voice combined with the warmth of the water was lulling Daenerys to sleep, but she fought her tiredness, trying to concentrate on what was being said. “I have every faith in you, my lord.”

Jon’s movements stopped for a moment. He hesitated before continuing down her arms, wiping the grim of the days’ of battle from them. “Grey Worm was left in charge. We have men grabbing any dead bodies they can find for burn piles even as the dead continue to attack. Only the army of men seem to be out now. It’s the closest we’ve had in a break.”
Daenerys nodded. She knew all of this already, but suspected Jon needed to say it outloud in order to sort his own thoughts and think through his plans of what would come next. She leaned back and once again, Jon hesitated before he washed off her breasts. Daenerys felt her body stir at the touch, her nipples extra-sensitive to his ministrations.

Again, she pushed aside what that must mean. There was too much happening right now for such foolish hopes.

But perhaps she should see a maester, if just to put her mind at ease, sooner rather than later.

Jon was still talking. “I think the Night King won’t come until he’s convinced that he’s weakened us so much that it would be impossible for us to stand against him. He’ll pound us into exhaustion until there’s no way he won’t win.”

Daenerys nodded lightly, sleep overtaking her overworked mind again. She said without thinking, “I don’t want him to come. I don’t want to see what he’s done to my Viserion.”

Jon stopped washing her leg, his hand going to her chin to tilt her head to look at him. Daenerys’ eyes opened, violet meeting grey. She saw such sorrow in their depths and longed to take all of his pain away. “I am so sorry for what happened to him. I am so sorry.”

Daenerys brought her hand up from the rapidly cooling water, drips falling to the stone floor below as she caressed Jon’s beard. “You have nothing to be sorry for. It was my decision. And despite the terrible cost, I do no regret it.” She longed to kiss him, but didn’t have the energy to move forward at the moment. Daenerys closed her eyes once more. “If I look back, I am lost,” she whispered, mostly to herself.

Jon finished cleaning her in silence and when she stood he wrapped her back in her robe. They continued their conversation as she sat to comb out her hair. She thought about braiding it before bed, but decided against it.

“Sansa is hearing from the people, holding court each day,” Jon said. “Mostly people complaining their husbands should be higher in command or insane inventions meant to help. She’ll keep us informed of anything we need to know.”

The queen frowned, her reflection mirroring her displeasure back to her. Daenerys’ first instinct was to insist on being there, she was queen, after all. But this was Winterfell. This was the Starks’ court. She was here to help them win the war, not to tell them how to run their lands. Daenerys wanted to trust again, but life had taught her the lesson too harshly, so it was hard to let go. She knew she would have to do so in this land, let the noble families see to their kingdoms, as she would not be able to rule everything at once. She looked back at Jon using the mirror’s reflection. The Starks were the best family she could ever hope for, their loyalty and honor were truly amazing and she had nothing to worry about. Daenerys let her mistrust go and said, “Good. I hadn’t thought of that, but we must still hear the small people and those unable to fight, even in a war.”

Jon smiled, “That’s Sansa for you, solving problems before you even think of them.”

She smiled back and finished combing. As she set down the silver instrument, she pointed to the table on the other side of the door. There rested a raven’s scroll. “Jorah sent a message. The Dothraki we sent to White Harbor are trapped by a blizzard. So they can’t come back to reinforce us. We’re on our own.”

Jon nodded grimly. His eyes darted to the door, and he seemed anxious to leave, but Daenerys
didn’t want to let him go. It was selfish and she hated herself for the mixed messages she knew she kept sending him, but she still heard herself say, “Would you like to stay here to rest? I know you need the sleep and no one will interrupt us in here except for a dire emergency.

He bit his lip, clearly tempted, but before he could turn her down politely, Daenerys’ clutched his sleeve, letting her desperation take hold. “Please, Jon. I know you haven’t slept since the battle started and you need your rest. I need you at your best and exhausted isn’t that.”

Jon sighed. Then he sat and began to remove his muddy boots. He grumbled, “You always seem to get me to do whatever you want.”

Daenerys smiled as she went to turn down the furs so she could climb into her bed. Jon joined her shortly. She could feel the sleep and the exhaustion pulling at her, but she wanted to cherish this moment. She tried to continue their banter, but yawned half-way through it. “I am your queen.”

Jon, who was already half-asleep, answered, “Always and forever.”

In each others’ arms, they got just over five blissful, uninterrupted hours of sleep.

The smell of old books had always comforted Tyrion. His only happy days in his childhood had been spent lost in Casterly Rock’s library, reading about dragons and alchemy and any other topic that caught his interest. Books had always been his only friends, his only true companions.

He had once thought it was books and his brother Jaime, but he knew the truth now.

Tyrion downed the flask of whiskey he’d brought in despite the fat Tarly’s objections. The lines on the page blurred for a moment but with a little extra focus he could see them again. He continued to read about the history of Winterfell.

This was a pointless exercise. He doubted there was anything here to find about the dead, but Tyrion had had his fill of fighting and had no desire to be out on the parpets or battlefields. He was content to stay in the library with the only real love and comfort he’d ever found in this cruel, shit world.

Besides, out there somewhere was his brother, and Tyrion was no longer speaking to his brother.

He was planning to help the queen build a better world, but what was in it for him? He had no family, no real friends, no loved ones left. It was a world he desperately wanted to see, but there was nothing in it for him.

He thought of Tysha. He could barely remember her face. He’d been so young then. And he’d spent so long trying to forget that last time with her. Her cries, her pain, and it had all been for the crime of loving him.

Tyrion wished Tywin was still alive, just so he could kill the old man all over again. He hadn’t savored it enough last time. He’d been too busy escaping his death sentence.

He finished his whiskey and wished he hadn’t sent Bronn away to kidnap, no secure, a pyromancer from King’s Landing, for the back-up plan he’d gotten his queen’s reluctant approval on. Tyrion could use a drinking buddy right now.
Everyone else around this castle was too busy worrying about the fight. He supposed he should worry too, those living dead men and monsters could kill him too. But fuck them. Fuck them all. What good would a risen dwarf be to them? His best asset was his mind and it would be gone as a wight.

Tyrion stumbled off the bench. He needed more to drink. He didn’t want to feel feelings anymore. He left the library, keeping one hand on the wall to steady himself as he went down narrow stairs. He hoped he was going the correct way for the kitchen, as he didn’t want to get lost and was loath to ask anyone for directions.

When he reached a hall he didn’t recognize, he saw some children playing. Odd to see such a normal sight at the end of times, but these were too small to fight. One of the children tripped and spilled onto the hard floor. He began crying instantly.

Tyrion walked over and offered a hand to help the child up. He smiled at the child, who recoiled at his presence. The child cried out, “Get away from me, imp!” Then began wailing even harder.

Tyrion did his best to hide the hurt, walking on, ignoring the others who had saw but quickly pretended not to. He was used to it, but gods, why did it still have to hurt so much to have children be so terrified of him?

Tyrion wished he hadn’t been so drunk in Essos. He hadn’t truly appreciated the lack of hatred. He was still stared at, still whispered about, but no one feared him. No one called him a demon monkey. A murderous, lecherous dwarf.

He’d just been a regular (if drunken) dwarf. He hadn’t even thought to appreciate it. He had gotten too used to it too quickly.

Though in Essos they had tried to sell him into slavery and kill him for his cock, so it wasn’t like that country was some paradise.

Tyrion walked through the castle, but between the whiskey in his veins and the fact that he’d never really bothered to learn where the cellars of Winterfell were, it didn’t take him long to get lost. He stumbled into a room, finding the castle’s Lady speaking with some man about something called black powder. Tyrion’s mind scrambled to make the connection, tried to remember if he’d ever heard something like that before, but his brain was swimming in liquor and not able to make the leaps that were usually so easy for him.

Sansa dismissed the man and walked over to Tyrion. “You’re drunker than usual,” she observed.

It took a moment, but Tyrion finally recognized the room he was currently in. He bowed a bit to the Lady Sansa then immediately felt ridiculous. What was he bowing to her for? Stupid. He looked at his empty cup, deciding that perhaps the lady was right. But still, now that he knew where he was he could fetch a bottle he’d stashed away. Sansa probably thought he was nuts when he began tapping on the stones of the wall, but one of them hid a very precious item.

It only took 10 minutes to find. Tyrion was almost surprised that Sansa was still there watching him with, was that concern? He ignored her though to resume his drinking.

Deciding to be generous, Tyrion grinned and held up his newly acquired bottle, “May I poor you a drink, Lady of Winterfell? This is the last of the Dornish Red in my possession. I was going to save it for a special occasion. But in these dark days, living seems to be celebration enough.”

The lady hesitated but found herself a glass. She still how a sour look on her face as she admitted,
“I do miss the wine from the South.”

Tyrion finished his glass, pouring another, trying to will himself to slow down. This was the last of his wine and he was probably too drunk to really appreciate it, but he still shouldn’t waste it. “It’s the best in the Seven Kingdoms, and trust me, I have tested all of the liquors just to make sure.”

Sansa smiled a bit at the joke, looking at her wine. “I didn’t know that. I hadn’t had much liquor before the Lannisters, just sips or small glasses at feasts. But I grew fond of it thanks to your sister.” She took a long draw of the sweet red. “I’m loath to admit it, but Northern ale just doesn’t suit my tastes.”

“There’s no shame in admitting such a thing, my lady,” Tyrion refilled Sansa’s glass, not noticing the bit that splashed onto her dress. “When this is all over, your brother will be king and can arrange for you to get monthly shipments of wine. Or I’ll send you some from the vineyards the queen promised me.”

Sansa snorted out a very unladylike laugh. “You think that’s how this will all end? I thought your queen was marrying Jon off.”

Now Tyrion snorted. “She says that, but I know better. They’ll be married before the year ends. I’d bet on it. It’s not the smart move, but she’s a woman in love; they aren’t known for doing the smart thing.” The wine was so smooth, so rich. Tyrion wished he’d stashed away more when he’d had the chance. But he’d thought they would be invading the King’s Landing, not heading north when they’d sailed from Essos.

How strangely life turned out. Tyrion had so dreaded fighting his family, well, not Cersei, but Jaime, and now that he was back on the same side of his brother, he wished Daenerys had had the bastard killed. “I told you of my first marriage, didn’t I?”

“Aye,” Sansa said. “On our wedding night.”

“What did I say? I can’t quite remember.” Tyrion had the decency to blush. He had gotten very drunk that day.

“Not much other than it was a short marriage.”

“That it was. My father was furious that I married a commoner.”

Sansa looked out the window, her blue eyes focused on something Tyrion couldn’t see. “Jon has promised me that I will choose me next husband. I keep wondering if it might be best to marry a commoner. Someone with no power of their own, someone so grateful to me they must love me.”

Tyrion thought of her words, thought of Tysha, how sweet and loving she’d been. He’d always colored his memories of her as she’d been a paid and talented whore, but she had just been that -- sweet and loving, like he imagined a mother would be. “Find someone like your father to marry,” Tyrion advised. “Someone honorable and brave who’s a good man.”

“Well, if you ever met another man like that, you be sure to let me know,” Sansa replied with a small smile.

Tyrion chuckled. That was true. Ned Stark was one man in a hundred, much like his own father. He studied Sansa, she had grown into such a beautiful woman. Not that it was surprising, but just think, if things had gone a bit differently, this beauty might still be his wife. There marriage hadn’t been all bad, had it? He attempted to keep his voice light as he said, “I’ve had worse marriages.”
Sansa’s blue eyes met his, which made Tyrion want to gulp, but they softened as she gave him a small smile, and he thought, if our marriage had been valid this is the moment I would have fallen in love with her. “So have I,” she said.

They lifted their cups as if in a toast, the soft clank echoing to signal this moment of understanding between the Stark and the Lannister.

The rush of the dead had come in a few hours before Jon had planned to sleep. It had been a hard fight. The winds and the snow had picked up again, making the world white even in its darkness. The glowing blue eyes had actually proved to be an advantage for their bowmen. It gave them targets in the low visibility.

Jon had never been talented with a bow, but he picked off as many enemies as he could beside Arya. It was a good feeling, fighting beside his beloved sister.

Arya’s bow had been dropping wights faster than Jon could see her notch and loose. It almost made him nervous, how good she had gotten since he’d last seen her. But he was better too. They’d all changed in these years apart. He couldn’t expect Arya to stay a little girl forever.

He’d had to abandon his position beside Arya (though she’d followed him anyway) when he heard a wildling horn on the winds. Jon had run towards it, knowing the Free Folk wouldn’t call for help lightly. As he ran he ordered the Dothraki with him to reinforce against whatever the Free Folk were facing.

Jon has always thought of the Dothraki as Free Folk with horses, but now he knew that he’d been wrong in that impression. When he’d gotten to know the Dothraki on Dragonstone, he’d only seen their culture and camp life, it wasn’t until he saw them in battle he truly understood them. The Free Folk were fierce and fearless fighters, but knew little of strategies and tactics. The Dothraki weren’t like that. War was a way of life to them, and Jon learned new cavalry strategies from Daenerys’ bloodriders.

Jon found his own horse so he could ride with the Dothraki to reach the Free Folk as soon as possible. To his surprise, Arya still followed him, finding a horse for herself when Jon hadn’t been looking. Arya had always been a natural rider, many had compared her to Lyanna.

Jon didn’t want to think about the woman who’d been his mother, so he turned his attention to the fight in front of him. When he reached the Free Folk, he saw the problem immediately.

Giants.

It had only been a few years ago that Jon had thought such things were just from stories, but now he faced an army of undead ones. The Free Folk had once had their own giants, but as they had been on the front lines of this fight for so long, all of their numbers had diminished.

Jon barely thought before ordering those with him to follow him as he urged his horse to first giant he saw. Longclaw sliced through the giant’s legs, bringing him down. Jon reared the horse back so he could take the monster’s head.

But the giant moved too fast. With one swipe of his massive hand, he tossed Jon’s horse aside. Jon had only moments before he launched himself away. Luckily, he hadn’t let go of Longclaw and
spun to face his foe.

Large, unblinking blue eyes watched him. The head inclined, studying him for a moment. Why doesn’t he attack? Jon wondered absently. Then the other hand came for him.

Jon ducked it, swiping up with his blade. He cut through the monster’s hand, but it wasn’t enough damage to make a difference. Jon twirled the blade, better positioning it to stab the giant. Jon’s eyes connected with the glowing blue of his foes.

“Jon! Behind you!” Arya called out. Jon turned his head just enough to see what Arya was yelling about.

A second giant was behind him, bringing down a huge club.

On instinct, Jon rolled away. The club hit exactly where he’d been standing, leaving behind a massive dent in the snow and perhaps even the frozen ground.

Jon made a mention note to thank his sister. He lunged forward, slashing at the second giant’s belly. Intestines fell out but the creature continued to move. He swung his club once more. Jon hugged the ground to escape the blow.

The first giant had tried to take this opportunity and nearly stomped Jon to death. But an arrow appeared in the giant’s right eye, it distracted him long enough for Jon to escape and then swing around, stabbing the giant in the back. Then he swung back to the giant’s front and drove Longclaw upward, straight through what remained of the giant’s brain. The glowing blue dimmed.

Jon didn’t wait, remembering the second giant. It wasn’t where he’d left it. He saw where it had gone, it had started toward where the arrows that were now pestering him were coming from. Jon’s anger flared up and with a yell, he ran down the giant and killed him before he could reach its destination.

Jon wasn’t surprised when he looked up to find Arya with her bow. She ran to hug him. Jon wanted to reprimand her for doing that when the battle wasn’t over yet, but it felt so good to feel Arya in his arms again. He held her a bit tighter, wishing he never had to let go.

But he did, rubbing her shoulders as he said, “Come on, we have more work to do.”

Sansa was tired. She tried to remember the last time she had gotten any real sleep and couldn’t pinpoint a day. Then again, time was hard to track without a sun to mark the days and nights.

“I’m sorry, milady?” The guard looked confused, but Sansa knew he’d heard her perfectly well. She repressed a sigh.

“You heard me. Now do as I say,” Sansa dismissed the guard as well as the inventor. The inventor had brought with him a strange black powder that could be explosive when fire was applied to it. Sansa thought it too destructive to be useful in the war efforts, but she did have one plan for it.

One she was putting in motion now.
Her thoughts were interrupted by a lord’s entrance. He said, “Lady Stark, I have a grievance.”

Sansa could feel the headache beginning. She didn’t need this right now. “Lord Ryswell, I have much to see to at the moment.”

“It cannot wait,” the lord’s face resembled a tomato - round and red. Sansa wondered when the last time she’d ate was, tomatoes were obviously gone, but even some bread would be good right now. The lord was speaking, but Sansa mostly tuned him out -- despite whatever his grievance was, there were far more important things going on.

Jon and Arya were out on the battlefield near constantly. The queen, when not on her dragons burning away the dead, was usually also seeing to her armies. This left Sansa in charge of all the logistics of running the castle and keeping those who could not fight useful. She led sewing circles in the afternoons. The ladies made socks, an item as precious as bread to a winter army. Arya had always mocked her for her needles, but they might save soldiers now, Arya included. Many had already had to be taken off the battlefields because of frostbitten feet, some had even lost them.

Sansa had also been left in charge of the small folk and somehow still complaining lords and ladies lodging in Winterfell. The amount of work left to her almost made her wish she had picked up and sword and learned to fight like the rest of them.

But then who would have done this? Her part in the battle wasn’t glamorous. No one wrote songs about those who kept the country running while others fought the battles. No one bothered to remember the women who sewed socks and made bread.

Sansa learned the hard way that most of the things people wrote songs about were nonsense. The real world was full of things that weren’t in songs and never likely to appear in them. They didn’t write songs about taxes and saving grain for winter. But those things killed just as well as a sword through a stomach.

Just when Sansa was about to cut off the lord’s rant, Missandei walked in. She said, “Lady Stark, the queen sends for you.”

Sansa rose and said to the lord, “Lord Ryswell, please write down your complaint in a scroll and leave it with Merida.” She indicated on of her servants. “And I will see to it.”

Sansa left to join Missandei. She was too exhausted to remember the woman’s foreign name, but she was happy to leave.

The queen rarely sent for Sansa. They spoke when they could, as the queen seemed interested in the concerns of the people. It helped Sansa realize that Jon was right, Daenerys was no Cersei.

She wondered sometimes, what it might have been like if Daenerys had been the visiting queen all those years ago when she’d been a girl. She surely would have loved a queen closer to her again. She would have begged to braid her silver hair and wanted to become the queen’s new best friend. She imagined Daenerys would have indulged her kindly, with more sincerity than Cersei ever had.

Though for all her faults, Cersei had taught Sansa much. Perhaps as much as her lady mother, who had been a good, kindly woman who only wanted to protect her children from the harshness of the world. But Cersei had shown Sansa the world’s harshness, had taught her to be just as harsh in return.

Sansa tried to push such thoughts away. She looked to the foreign woman walking beside her. Sansa hadn’t spoken much to the queen’s female advisor. What would she have in common with a
woman from some land she’d never known? In fact, Sansa wasn’t even sure where the other woman was from. She decided it was time to change that. “Where are you from, Lady…” Sansa trailed off, embarrassed she’d never bothered to learn the other woman’s last name in these past months.

“I’m no lady, Lady Stark. And I was never given a last name, only Missandei. I was kidnapped from Quath as a child, and traveled many places after that. It was in Astpar I met our queen.”

Kidnapped as a child. Sansa couldn’t imagine such cruelty. The image of Ramsey flashed in her mind. No, she knew such cruelty well enough. “That must have been horrible. It’s hard for me to even fathom slavery. Westeros outlawed it generations ago.”

“Westeros is wise in that. Quath doesn’t practice it either, nor do they have war. But that lack of warriors is why slavers favored it.”

Sansa pictured an idyllic land as Quath, like she once thought the Southern lands would be when her mother told her stories of her childhood. “So you’ve seen most of the known world then.”

Missandei smiled. “I suppose I have. I never thought about it.”

“Do you plan to return home when this is over?” Sansa asked.

“I am home. I will follow my queen. Where she goes is my home.”

What if she doesn’t make it through this? Sansa didn’t ask it. She didn’t really care about the answer and thought it would be cruel (and possibly treasonous) to mention it. They walked the rest of the way in silence.

Sansa was shocked to find refugees pouring into the gates of Winterfell. She could see the shadows of soldiers covering the entrance outside, but still she worried it may be a mistake to open the gates at all. But then she caught sight of a little girl hugging a doll to her chest and realized she wouldn’t have the heart to keep them out either.

She made her way to the queen who was arguing with her Hand and her army captain. Ser Davos was there as well, but not saying anything. The queen was yelling. “I will not leave my people to be killed by the Night King!”

Tyrion answered, “You have no choice. Your people need you here. You cannot run off on some fool’s errand.”

This just riled the queen up even more. “So I am a fool?”

Sansa and Missandei approached quietly, but were noticed immediately. Daenerys turned away, still fuming and Sansa could tell that Tyrion wasn’t finished arguing either. She leaned over to whisper to Davos, “What’s going on? Where’s Jon?”

Davos whispered back, “The king, lord, is out guarding the refugees coming in. They’re from the countryside. Apparently the Night King is around. He’s been raiding the countryside where we couldn’t see him. The queen wants to bring the battle to him.”

And Tyrion didn’t want her to risk it, Sansa finished in her mind. She looked around at those coming in. How were they to feed all of these people? How could they win against such evil?

Daenerys turned to her, her voice commanding but lacking the fire it had previously held, “Lady Sansa, I am sorry to burden you further, but we need to give these people bread and water. They’ve
suffered much.”

Sansa gave a slight bow. “Yes, your grace.”

Daenerys turned back to Tyrion now, her ire up again. “I will go out with Drogon and defeat the Night King.”

At this, the captain of the Unsullied spoke up. “No, my queen.” Daenerys spun and listened carefully. “It’s what this man wants you to do. He seeks to harm you. Tire out you and your dragons while he needs no rest. You cannot fall for such tricks.”

Tyrion nodded gratefully at the captain, “Thank you for seeing sense, Grey Worm.” He turned to Daenerys. “I know it’s hard, but he will exhaust you chasing him and then when you need the rest he doesn’t; he’ll kill you.”

Daenerys closed her eyes, her face looking up as a fresh round of light snow fell on her. Sansa saw just how beautiful the queen was and for a moment saw Daenerys as one of those maids from the stories she had loved so much as a girl.

But then the queen brought her head back down and said gravely, “I’ll stay. For now. I must.”

The problem with a good fight was that the adrenaline coursing through your veins didn’t just disappear. Jon couldn’t sleep now despite the respite in fighting after they’d driven another horde back. His fingers twitched from the excitement of battle still playing on his instincts and his mind raced. Jon knew he should eat something and get what sleep he could, but he knew it would be a hopeless quest. He couldn’t sleep now.

And when he saw Daenerys in her white furs, a bit smudged from the ash of smoke from Drogon, he knew who he didn’t want to sleep with. Jon brushed the thought aside, but when he saw her face brighten when she spotted him, it made him think that just maybe she wanted to spend it with him too. His heart leapt at the hope.

He made his way towards the queen, but was intercepted by Tormund, who threw an arm across his shoulders. “King Crow, join us. It was a good fight and we’re celebrating.”

Jon responded, “The fighting is far from over, Tormund.”

The big man grinned, “Aye, but we must celebrate our winnings just as we must mourn losses.”

Daenerys reached them now and Tormund grinned at her as well. “You fight well, dragon lady. You can join us too.”

“Dragon Queen,” Daenerys corrected, though she softened her words with a smile.

Tormund shrugged, and Jon nearly laughed. Even south of the Wall, Free Folk wouldn’t bother learning the ways of Westeros, the importance of titles and land ownership, or anything else they associated with kneeling. As Tormund walked towards the Free Folk camps, Jon held out an arm for Daenerys, “Shall we?”

Daenerys hesitated, looking to the castle. “I should bath and get some rest.”
“They’ll have beds out in the tents, and you need to meet all of your people. That includes the Free Folk, even if they don’t ever kneel to you.”

The queen nodded and took Jon’s arm. It felt right, but Jon tried to suppress the emotion. He guided Daenerys through the camp, pointing out things that were unique to the Free Folk culture and trying to explain the different factions and clans among them. Daenerys soaked in all the information he had, and Jon loved that for once he could teach her about a different culture.

Eventually, they found Tormund in the main gathering tent. He was drinking out of a skinned bag, which he offered to Jon. Jon sniffed the mysterious beverage before asking, “What is it?”

“Not the piss you southerners pass off as booze,” Tormund answered.

Jon interpreted that as he didn’t want to know what was in the skin. He took a drink and while it was certainly rougher than what he liked, it was far from the worst he’d ever had. The Free Folk weren’t know for their refinement in distilling after all. Jon took another drink as he found a seat for him and Daenerys.

Since the Free Folk had no kings, they had no need for thrones and high chairs, so Jon and Daenerys sat on mats along with the rest of the people. Jon looked around for familiar faces until he felt the tug on the skin and turned to Daenerys. “I want a drink.”

Jon held it out to her, but warned her, “It’s pretty bad.”

She took it from him. “I’m sure I’ve had worse with the Dothraki.” She took a deep pull but then nearly spit it back out, coughing once she swallowed it. Jon held back his laughter as he watched her eyes well up.

He took the skin back, saying nothing and taking another drink again. It went down smoothly and he had no trouble with it. The action was not lost on Daenerys who shook her head. “That may be worse than Dothraki mare’s milk.”

Jon chuckled. “It’s an acquired taste.”

“And you acquired it during your time with them?”

Jon shrugged. “I’ve always had northern tastes. We don’t have a lot of sweet wines here, your grace.”

Daenerys smiled and took the skin back. She drank it down without problem this time before handing it back. “I’m no southern maid, Lord Snow.”

Jon’s mind flashed to their previous times in bed. “No, your grace, you are not.”

Tormund came over, sitting next to Daenerys to Jon’s surprise. He had thought the man might keep away from the queen, but since when did Tormund get intimidated by titles?

The wildling man spoke with Daenerys, telling her his stories, all of which Jon had heard before. His mind drifted as the fermented goat’s milk forced his body to relax. He thought of today’s battle. The snow was back again, blinding their archers and forcing more hand-to-hand combat. Jon watched too many die today.

Tormund’s words finally broke his melancholy when he heard his friends say to the queen, “What made you pick this one, huh? You seem to be too much for him.”
Jon’s attention snapped to Tormund and Daenerys and he realized that queen was staring at him with a familiar glint to her eyes. Jon tried to remember how often she had taken the skin from his hand. He now realized it was almost gone.

Daenerys smiled and answered, “I’m too much for most men, but he’s just so pretty.”

Jon could feel his cheeks flush as Tormund chuckled. “Never thought you’d be the type to go for a pretty southern maid.”

Daenerys laughed lightly. “He wasn’t a maid when I found him.”

“He was a boy who didn’t even know what his pecker was for when I met him.” Tormund grinned in a lecherous way. “I taught him everything he knows.”

“He learned well.” Jon was definitely blushing now though he tried to ignore them, returning to his drinking.

Daenerys said, “My handmaiden taught me. She had been a pleasure slave in Essos.”

Tormund had no idea what that was but nodded anyway. Jon sort of knew and he wanted Daenerys to continue, wondering what she meant. But Tormund continued as though he still wasn’t there. “I taught the crow everything he knows. A virgin when I first met him. I knew southerners were cunts, but didn’t realize they let their kids go so long without the warmth of another person. I explained how things were up north.”

Daenerys smiled at the frank talk. “My instruction was more hands on. Doreah taught me by climbing into bed with me and guiding my hips.”

Jon though it was finally time to interrupt them as he didn’t want his imagination to get too carried away by Dany’s story. He was sure he didn’t want to hear the rest of it if there was nothing he could do about it. He asked, “What are you two talking about?”

“Nothing.” Daenerys said.

“Fucking.” Tormund replied.

Jon laughed at Daenerys’ false innocence turning to indignation at Tormund’s honesty. It felt good to laugh. He got to do it so rarely lately.

Jon truly joined in their conversation now and he noticed that Daenerys scooted a little closer to him each time she took something to drink. Tormund told them about life beyond the Wall, which fascinated Daenerys and she questioned the wildling thoroughly.

It wasn’t until the skin was empty the Jon noticed that Daenerys was current under his arm. He blinked looking at the empty skin and then her and wondering when that happened.

Tormund was in the middle of telling his ridiculous bear story, which seemed to amuse Daenerys. When he finished, she looked up at Jon and said, “Bears have their charms, but I prefer wolves in my bedchamber.”

Jon felt the rush of blood downward and was glad to see Tormund understand and dismiss himself quietly. Daenerys turned herself towards Jon, but he stopped her, “We’ve been drinking.”

“So what?” Her violet eyes were nearly completely black, which made Jon want to just let his queen have her way.
But his honor refused such a thing, “You told me we needed to stop.”

“I don’t care anymore. I’ve missed you, Jon. So much.” Her arms wrapped around his neck, her fingers playing with his curls.

Jon enjoyed the sensations. He’d missed her too. More than anything in his life he missed this woman. He tried to think of something to say, something logical that would break the spell she was weaving over him.

But then Daenerys leaned over and kissed Jon, and Jon immediately returned it. He guided her into his lap, grateful they were with the Free Folk, who thought nothing of such public affections, regardless of who was doing it. The lords and ladies of Westeros would be horrified to see their queen and the Warden of the North dry humping and making out in full view of everyone.

“Take me to bed, my king,” she whispered into his ear, as she continued to nibble and kiss his jawline.

Jon stood, his hands on his queen’s ass to keep her securely against him, as he walked them to the nearest empty tent. As soon as he found a pile of furs that acted as a bed, he laid her down on it, continuing to kiss her.

Daenerys wasted no time, disarming him and throwing his belt and sword aside. Jon began tugging at her laces, his hands seeking out her soft, naked skin. In almost a haze, their clothes were removed as each continued to nibble and kiss every new patch of skin laid bare.

Jon pulled back when Daenerys was fully nude, looking at her with the same love in his eyes as he had that first night on the boat. It seemed so long ago, or yesterday, he wasn’t sure. But he did now what he hadn’t the courage to do then, he said, “I love you.”

Daenerys smiled back at him, her hand pushing back a lock of his dark hair. “I love you too,” she said.

Jon leaned down and kissed her, softly this time, forcing the pace slower. He promised himself he would never need miss her again, as he wouldn’t let her go this time. He wouldn’t let her separate them again, no matter what their advisors, their subjects or their families said. They were meant to be. He knew it. He knew he existed to meet her, to love her, just as he knew they had to defeat the Night King.

His hand stroked her leg lovingly as he placed it over his shoulder and positioned himself outside of her soft entrance. Jon pulled back once more so that he could look into her eyes as he joined her again.

Daenerys brought his head back, their foreheads touching and she breathed out, “Please.”

Jon thrust forward, home again at last. His breath came heavy despite not doing much, but his queen’s breath matched his. He kissed her gently again, before he pulled back and repeated the soft thrust.

Daenerys’ other leg moved to wrap around his waist, tightening to encourage him to move faster. Jon resisted, wanting to make this last as long as he was able.

But his queen wasn’t one to be denied. Her nails bite his shoulders and his scalp and he rejoiced at the slight pain. She moved her hips faster, out of sync with his, until he finally gave in.

Jon could hear her groan even though his mouth covered hers. It snapped the last of his restraint.
He knew he should be exhausted from fighting for hours, but his body didn’t seem to know it. Instead it showed her everything he couldn’t quite put into words, showed her how much he loved her, how much he would do for her, how he would always want her. Her head was thrown back and her vocalizations filled the tent. Jon went harder, faster, feeling more like a king now between her legs than he ever had when he held the title.

They reached the heights together and he dropped to the side afterwards, exhaustion finally catching up to him. Daenerys curled up to him and he hugged her. He wanted to say something, obtain her promise to marry him, but he didn’t have it in him to argue with her now. Jon contented himself with the murkiness of what this meant.

They slept together that night and every night after, too desperate for the contact and comfort to go without. Neither talked about their future or what their need to be together meant.

Arya remembered following that mangy cat all around King’s Landing. Jaime Lannister reminded her of that alley cat. Partly because of his feline features, but also in the way he didn’t seem to groom himself anymore.

He couldn’t call himself the best looking man in Westeros anymore, that was certain. Though he still managed to get the ladies following him, along with Arya, Brienne of Tarth was always near him. She clearly cared for the former Kingsguard, seemed to be the only person did. The were sparring now, which Arya thought a pointless exercise. There would be fighting enough when the next wave of the dead came.

But they seemed to enjoy it, mocking and teasing each other even as they traded blows with their matching swords. Swords that had been once been one sword. The sword that had been Ice, her father’s sword. Arya’s eyes narrowed. The kingslayer had never harmed her in any way, but her father had despised the man. That was enough for her to hate him as well. All of the Lannisters would pay for what was done to the Starks.

She knew Jon would say that the Lannisters have paid plenty since the war, but it wasn’t enough for Arya. Not while Cersei lived, sat on her Iron Throne still threatening her family. No, she still had unfinished business.

Jaime Lannister was good with a sword, not as good as the stories had said, but he did well enough with his left hand. Still Arya dissected his skill, pinpointing his weaknesses. He sometimes still moved up with his right head, old muscle memory not quite gone yet. His grip wasn’t as strong as it probably had been either.

Arya learned everything the lion had to teach her. She would use it well as soon as she was able.

Sometimes she thought she should just kill him now, take his face and be done with it. She could get to King’s Landing and kill Cersei within the month. Then at least that threat would be eliminated and they could concentrate on the dead.

But she wasn’t ready to leave Jon, Sansa and Bran. She missed her family too much. She wasn’t ready to abandon Winterfell, her home. She wanted to stay. She wanted to help here.

Still, every night she recited her list. Every night she knew she was one day closer to her prey, even if she hadn’t moved. They needed Jamie and his sword for now. Every warrior was needed against
the dead, but soon enough the chaos of battle would give her an opportunity. A chance to take the lion’s face without any questions.

She only needed to wait.

So she watched, she learned and she bided her time as she hunted her cat. Arya was so focused on Jaime Lannister she didn’t hear the other man sneak up on her until he said, “Whacha doin’ little girl?”

Arya jumped, which she hadn’t done in a long time. Then she looked to the Hound, his eyes followed where hers had been. “Jaime Lannister?” He looked at her again. “What are you doing?”

“None of your business,” Arya spat out. She tried to run away, but the Hound was just a bit too fast for her, catching her before she could dash off.

His eyes connected with hers. The Hound studied her for a moment, as if figuring out her plan by just looking at her. He snorted when he finished but didn’t let her go. “You’re mad.” He didn’t explain his conclusion, just glared at the snow. “It’s too fucking cold up here.”

“You can leave;” Arya spit out, pulling herself from his grip.

Sandar snorted. “Yeah, and where would I go? Nowhere’s safe any more. Fleeing to Essos the only thing left, and I don’t speak any of those languages.”

Arya did. Part of her wanted to brag, but she thought it smarter to keep some of her new talents secret, even if she didn’t see the Hound as her enemy any more. Sandar shivered from the cold and a dragon’s cry on the winds made him shudder harder. He grumbled, “I’m in one of the hells. Probably deserve it, but fuck me. All that fire and it’s still cold as fuck.”

“Dragons save you,” Arya pointed out.

“Fire’s still fire,” he replied.

Arya looked around and saw that Jaime Lannister had left. She cursed and got up to track him back down, but the Hound’s words stopped her. “You don’t need the lion. Cersei might not trust him now, anyways.”

Arya wondered how he knew that. Perhaps she hadn’t been the only one tailing someone. “I need his face.”

“She has other men, closer to her. My brother, for example.”

Arya grinned, an even better idea. She held no love for any Lannister, but Ser Jaime had never actually hurt her or her family. But the Mountain? He was a monster and everyone knew it. She still remembered her introduction to him. When he’d killed his horse for little reason.

The Hound stood with a nod to the young woman. “Just tell me when you’re ready to leave.”

Arya thought of Jon, Sansa, and Bran -- would she ever be ready to leave her family again?

Bran had been wrong. He’d been so sure the attack would be on White Harbor. His visions had told
him that, but they’d been wrong. He wished he’d had more time with Bloodraven, had more time to learn about being the Three-Eyed Raven. He was Jon’s eyes, he couldn’t be wrong.

He would make it up to him. Bran would help Jon win this battle. He couldn’t be the knight he’d dreamed of being when he was younger, but he could be something better.

Bran had continued to search through the past, as he could no longer trust the present, but he could never get far enough back to help. Any time he came close he remembered the warning of getting lost and not being able to come back and pulled himself out of it, but it wasn’t enough.

He knew little about the fighting going on. None of his siblings had time to visit with him though each tried to share a meal with him occasionally, though those were always cut short by some other thing pulling them away. At least Jon and Sansa had been kind enough not to mention that his visions had been wrong. Arya had warned him about the dangers of magic, which was a warning he didn’t need.

Bran’s only real information came from visits with Samwell Tarly. The young, fat lord had meant to go south and see to his family, but the weather had prevented anyone from leaving. But Samwell seemed to enjoy their visits, liked talking about what he learned, liked hearing about his visions.

Bran looked into Sam’s past and figured out that the other man missed Aemon Targaryen. Bran seemed the closest he could get to speaking with the blind old man.

The Targaryens -- Bran had been spending more time looking into their family. It couldn’t be coincidence that the last two were here together at the end of the world. But he learned little more than what could be found in the history books.

Still, thinking of the Dragon Queen gave Bran an idea. Samwell had told him how the queen was struggling to keep her dragons under control. The beasts would grab the undead men and creatures, burn them, but then tossed them back to the ground with little regard. When she rode her mount it was better, but the dragons still were causing problems.

Bran thought of a solution -- he could warg into one. He figured the green one would be better as he didn’t understand the bond between a dragon and its rider, but understood it might create complications for an interloper. He sort of wished Jon could warg, as he might be better suited to cloak himself in dragon’s skin, but Bran had to try anyway.

He waited out in the godswood, resisting the urge to looked into the past despite sitting next to the Weir tree as he always did. He waited until he heard the sounds of battle and the dragon’s roar. Then he prepared himself, letting his head fall back as he sought out the beast’s mind.

It was harder than usual to find. Dragons weren’t like any creature he’d ever known before and their minds were not easy to penetrate. It wasn’t quite like a human’s, it was too wild for that, but it wasn’t quite animal either.

It took Bran several tries before he latched on, and as soon as he did he was forced out again. In fact, it was more than that, Bran was thrown from the dragon’s mind, so strongly that his wheeled chair was pushed back from the Weir tree. Bran blinked. It had never hurt to fail to warg until now. He could feel something in his head ache.

He barely heard the dragon’s roar as he struggled to recover. It wasn’t until he heard the beats of the dragon’s wings that Bran looked up. He saw the dragon moving towards the godswood, roaring as it flew directly at him. He barely had time to wonder how the dragon knew where he was before the beast opened its giant jaws and let loose its flames.
The godswood went up in flames, destroyed by their own dragon. Bran ducked down, avoiding the immediate danger.

Rhaegal didn’t stop until the entire wood was either aflame or in ashes. Bran was carried away by two servants who came out to fetch him as soon as the danger appeared. He watched as his last hope of helping was destroyed, and why? Why did the dragon attack? And how did it know where he was?

What magic did such creatures possess?
What happened when it was combined with the Night King’s?

“What in the Seven Hells was that?”

Daenerys walked by Jon, ignoring his outrage. She was far more furious than him. But he followed her, still yelling, “We have enough problems without your damned dragons trying to burn down Winterfell.”

That made her stop. She whirled around. “Rhaegal wasn’t trying to burn down Winterfell. Your brother did something to him.” She couldn’t explain it, but she’d felt it. The intrusion. That’s what made Rhaegal so angry.

Dragons were not slaves.

She continued to walk and Jon followed. “What do you mean? What did Bran do?”

“I’m not sure, but I’m going to find out. He will be punished accordingly.” Under her breath she added, “Perhaps with his head on a pike.”

Jon stopped her, grabbing her arm. “What? No. You won’t do that.”

Daenerys glared at the hand on her personhood. She then glared at its owner. “I’m queen, I will do what I want.”

Jon leaned in and growled, “He’s my family.”

“And Rhaegal is my family.”

She watched as Jon calmed down. He let her go, taking in a deep breath. “Let’s calm down and just go talk to Bran. It seems like he did something and Rhaegal reacted. It may be over and even now.”

Daenerys saw the wisdom in Jon’s words, but she still felt too much anger to do more than nod at his rationale. She began walking again, Jon following. She tried to force her anger down, knowing it was more defensiveness than anything. It was the same emotion that always bubbled within her when anyone attacked her children. She knew what dragons were, knew the danger they posed. She would never forget the image of a dead, burnt child laying at her feet, a child’s death that was on her hands.

She reached Bran, who was already surrounding by northmen, who were clearly prepared for this fight. Daenerys jutted out her chin, just as ready. She ignored the men who held their swords to her threateningly, knowing Jon would stop them, mad at her or not. She looked to the boy in the
The three-eyed raven, as he was called, had the good sense to look shamed. He didn’t meet her eyes as he replied, “I was trying to help. I thought if I warged with the dragon I could help in the battle, direct the beast with a man’s mind.”

“A dragon is not a slave,” Daenerys growled. “Nor is it a beast without its own intelligence.” She looked back at Jon, who looked at his brother worried.

He bit his lip and then gently chided, “Bran, you know you should only do that with unintelligent beasts. It doesn’t work with men or animals with a strong will.”

Daenerys felt she got a glimpse of who this boy might have been once as he answered Jon, “I did it with Summer all the time.”

Jon’s eyes saddened further, if possible. “Summer was yours. He allowed you to do it, but the dragons are not. It was a violation. You know that.”

Watching Jon, the fire burned out of Daenerys. She didn’t know how to punish his brother and she was no longer sure she wanted to. She turned her attention to the glaring lords.

“The boy is right,” one of them said. Daenerys wished she had bothered learning these men’s names. Missandei had, but she was out visiting Grey Worm, sharing a bowl of broth with him as the captain walked the front lines.

Another lord chimed in, “Those winged serpents of your are dangerous. They are just as likely to kill us as the damned wights, reckless as they are.”

“Well then, if we are no longer welcome here, perhaps we shall take our dragons and go,” Tyrion answered for her. He entered the room with a cup in hand. Daenerys wasn’t sure how drunk her Hand was, but he didn’t stumble when he walked, which she took as a good sign. Still, she was glad to see him, glad to have someone on her side.

The lords continued to glare, but swallowed any further protests. Daenerys knew as much as they might grumble, only a fool would wish to fight the Army of the Dead sans dragons.

Jon took over. “It’s been a long day of battle. We’re all tired and hungry. Let’s quit to the dining hall and get some food.” Jon walked behind his brother and guided the chair out. He glanced at Daenerys, who gave him a quick grateful smile.

The lords filed out after their former king, now warden, leaving Daenerys alone with Tyrion. She nodded at his glass. “Do you have any more of that?”

He nodded and fetched a servant and a second glass. Daenerys stared at the red liquid without drinking it. She moved to the window, looking out across the courtyard. Men and women were preparing for battle. Such actions were constant any more, but it was tiring Daenerys out. She closed her eyes for a moment.

Tyrion interrupted her thoughts. “I see that you and Lord Snow have made up. I must remind you that he is still your heir and it would still be prudent to use his marriage to gain another alliance when this is all over.”

Daenerys wanted to laugh. Did he really think there would be a when this is all over? Instead she said aloud something she was still reluctant to confess to herself, “I’m pregnant.”
Tyrion said nothing. Daenerys turned and saw that she had properly shocked the man. She wanted to make a quip but was too tired to think of anything witty. When Tyrion regained his senses, he asked, “Is your dear nephew the father then?”

Nephew -- of all the things Daenerys felt for Jon, that one wasn’t even on the list. He was her lover, her partner, her only family, her everything, but she had never known Rhaegar. How could she know Jon as his son?

“Yes,” she answered simply.

“That solves the succession crisis, I guess. When do you want to wed?”

“A pregnancy is not a healthy, living baby,” Daenerys said. “And I haven’t been to a maester to confirm it yet anyway.”

Tyrion’s eyes narrowed. “He doesn’t know.”

Daenerys didn’t answer, but her Hand was no fool. “Are you planning on telling him?”

“Not yet.”

“When?”

Daenerys hesitated. She wasn’t sure. She was scared to lose the child. Scared to lose Jon. She didn’t want to worry him further. Didn’t want to pressure him into marrying her. Didn’t want to do anything that might distract him as he went into every battle.

She took a sip of wine and grimaced at the flavor. Apparently the babe didn’t share her fondness for the vintage. “When I deem it appropriate.”

Tyrion was clearly dying to say more, ask more questions, but he swallowed them.

Sir Podrick Payne, honorable knight at last, the thought made even Tyrion’s sour mood lift. He’d immediately offered to get the boy drunk once he’d heard the news. Now the two old friends sat together, exchanging stories from their time apart.

“That sounds like bullshit.”

“On my honor,” Tyrion swore.

“Your honor’s shit too,” Podrick smiled into his cup.

Tyrion attempted to look offended, but was surprised by the voice coming from the doorway defending him. “Careful, Sir Payne. It’s not wise for even a knight to make an enemy of the Hand of the Queen.”

Podrick leapt to his feet at the entrance of the man who’d given him his long sought after post. The sight made Tyrion roll his eyes. “What brings you here Lord Snow?”

Jon answered, “I was looking for Sam. The library is usually a safe bet for finding him.”
Tyrion sobered at the man’s serious tone, as well as the parchment in his hand. “Something troubling you?”

“Not really, we got word from the Maesters. I wanted Sam’s opinion.” Jon looked around at the books. The former king seemed to be lost in memories. Tyrion understood.

Former king. Tyrion also understood that Jon Snow may be king again soon. Daenerys and him were sleeping together again. It probably wouldn’t take long for the queen to justify Jon as her choice in husband, especially if she was truly pregnant. Part of Tyrion wanted to be happy for them -- two good people, good rulers, finding love with each other at the end of the world. But a bigger, more bitter part of him couldn’t help but hate everyone else for their love and happiness. He’d been denied his, after all, why shouldn’t the rest of the world?

His grim thoughts were disrupted by the entrance of Samwell Tarly, new Lord of the Reach. He was supposed to go down to his lands, but the weather had prevented any traveling. They were all stuck here, battling the dead.

Tyrion took a swig of northern ale. It wasn’t his drink of choice, but they were beginning to ration and he had to adapt. Samwell and Jon were talking, but in hushed tones so Tyrion couldn’t hear them. He wasn’t sure he wanted to.

They were losing the war. Not by much, not yet, but they weren’t doing any noticeable damage to the army of the dead. They could not afford a war of attrition; they had to win and fast. Because the enemy didn’t require food, shelter or anything else men needed.

Tyrion wanted to get drunk. He wanted to forget that he would probably die in this cold northern hell. He wanted to join his first sweet wife before it had all gone to shit.

Tyrion pushed the sweet girl’s face from his mind. He couldn’t afford to think of Tysha. Not now. He couldn’t get lost in those feelings of guilt and shame on top of his despair. He instead clung to hatred of his brother.

He was so lost in his bitter musings, he barely noticed when Jon sat next to him. He looked across at Ser Payne. “You’re the new knight?”

Podrick seemed embarrassed by the attention, looking down and blushing a bit. “Yes, my lord.”

Tyrion had no patience for the boy’s modesty, “Long overdue. Ser Payne here saved me in the Battle of the Blackwater.”

Jon nodded. “I heard you took on a giant here in the Battle of Winterfell.”

Podrick tried to remain humble, it was a trait Tyrion both admired and despised about the boy. “It was just a little one, but it was trying to knock down a wall. Someone had to stop him before he caused a breech.”

Jon lifted his glass to the new knight. “As Warden of Winterfell, I thank you Ser Payne.”

Podrick still seemed embarrassed, but accepted the toast and praise. Tyrion filled all of their mugs though he noticed Tarly didn’t much drink. He sat close to Jon, looking worried and clearly thinking about something. Tyrion asked, “What was on that scroll you were reading before?”

Samwell hesitated to answer, but Jon said, “The Maesters haven’t found much yet. But they have found one thing they think might help.” Now Jon hesitated.
“Well?” Tyrion prompted.

They handed the scroll over to him, and Tyrion read the words for himself:

*Fire may destroy ice; and ice may stop flame.*

*Both exist to fuel each other, or both die to ensure the other doesn’t rise again.*

Tyrion guessed what the Maesters thought this meant, but asked the question anyhow. Jon answered, “They think if the Targaryens and dragons die, it would stop the White Walkers. But I’ve seen the Night King’s dragon. It will only make them stronger and us weaker.”

Tyrion focused on Tarly. He discovered the other lord to be more than commonly intelligent. Possibly almost as well read as himself. He asked, “What do you think?”

Sam bit his lips before, considering, and then answered. “The passage was written in High Valyrian. The first battle with these creatures was between the First Men and the Children of the Forest. If the Targaryens and dragons even existed they were far off in Valyria. It doesn’t make sense.”

Tyrion agreed. He said, “I think it may be best if this raven was lost to the winter storms.” He tore up the scroll and then stood, walked over to the fire heating the room and threw in the scraps of parchment. “It will only anger the queen and the lords don’t need any ideas after the incident with the godswood.”

Jon nodded, but Sam looked to the flames. Tyrion didn’t care. He didn’t need foolishness plaguing scared men and women. As Hand, he would protect his queen and her children. He sat back down and resumed his drinking.

Tyrion looked as he company and realized that only Ser Payne wasn’t lord of one of the Seven Kingdoms. Odd that they would all be together now. And none would’ve ever hoped to rule their lands -- they had all been unwanted sons.

Though that wasn’t exactly true of Jon, was it? Rhaegar had wanted more children, which Elia couldn’t give him. “What are your plans, Warden? After the battle is fought and won, do you plan to stay in Winterfell?”

Tyrion had thought to call Jon Aegon, but realized with Podrick here, they were in mixed company. He noticed their cask of ale was running low and sent his bannerman to fetch more so they could talk more freely.

Jon ignored the question, but Tyrion persisted. So Jon answered with a quip, “I suppose whatever you plan for me.”

Tyrion snorted. “I didn’t plan for you to fuck Daenerys. I certainly didn’t plan on you being a secret Targaryen and rival for the throne.”

Jon sighed, “I don’t want the throne. You know that. We’ve already talked about this.”

Tyrion thought of the possible baby growing inside of the queen. He thought of the other child, his niece or nephew, in Cersei’s belly as well. Which child did he owe his allegiance? He blamed the ale for the treasonous thought. He held no love for Cersei. And the child might be an heir for him, Cersei had betrayed them all so she wasn’t likely to live when this ended, and he could raise the child up properly.
Or at least hire some Septa to raise the child up properly.

“I want to talk about it again.”

Jon finished his mug of ale and looked longingly at the door. Tyrion commented, “You can’t get drunk, anyway. We’re in the middle of a war.”

Jon frowned. Then he sighed and answered, “I don’t want to marry anyone else.”

“And I don’t want to be a dwarf. Life’s tough and full of shit we don’t want to eat. But we sometimes eat it anyway. We marry women we don’t love while breaking the heart of the one we do.”

“Are we still talking about me?”

“Does it always have to be about you?”

Sam, who hadn’t said much, took a big drink from his mug. Jon looked over it enviously. Tyrion finished his ale and wondered where in the hells Podrick was. Then again, he didn’t want the kid, knight, here for this conversation. So he pushed forward. “Never mind that. I know you love her and she loves you, but she’s a ruler. A good one. She is putting aside her personal feelings and doing what’s best for her family and for the people of Westeros. And you marrying someone else and producing Targaryen heirs is what’s best.”

“Fuck duty. I dedicated my last life to duty and do you know where it got me? Murdered. My father, Ned Stark, followed his duty. And where did it get him? Killed. Maybe I am making the same mistake as Rhaegar and Robb. Duty gets you killed. So does love. But at least with love, you get sex first.”

“I have no argument against that.” Tyrion said, surprised.

Jon glared at his empty mug. “I need another. Where is Ser Payne?”

Tyrion’s eyes narrowed, “I’m I really that drunk or have you gotten smarter?”

Jon snorted. “I know nothing.”

In a soft voice, Sam pointed out, “Daenerys isn’t the queen. Jon is the king.”

Tyrion glared at the fat young man. Then he gave a half-smile and leaned back. “I think you may be mistaken about that.”

Sam shook his head. “No, Jon Snow is…”

“Not that. That he is the true heir. Aegon wasn’t next in line for the throne after his father. Viserys was. Aerys had decreed that before he died. Daenerys may be a woman, but she was Viserys’ heir. Her claim is stronger than Aegon’s.”

All three men, who were now lords of kingdoms, knew what it meant to overlooked and unwanted by the fathers. But Jon still asked, “Why did Aerys do that?”

Tyrion replied, “My father once told me that Aerys used to call his grandchild half-breeds. To their faces.” Tyrion’s head ticked. “There’s a reason he was best friends with my father before they pissed each other off.”

No one spoke, taking in his words, processing his logic. Tyrion knew it wouldn’t matter in the end,
the truth of who the real heir was. It would be who they said it was. It would be who won the great
game. That’s who it always was.

Of course a marriage would solve any conflicts between who was the true ruler, but then they
risked not having an heir, which meant more wars in the future over the throne. But then that
problem might already be solved. Should they marry now or later? Would the commonfolk like a
wedding of hope in the middle of the war or would it be better combined with the celebration of
victory? If they lost, it would be better if they were married and the child could be spirited away, if
it came down to that.

Sometimes, Tyrion wished his brain would just rest.

Podrick returned and filled everyone’s mug. The conversation shifted to more conventional topics.
The strength of the battlements. Which soldiers were fighting with each other as much as the
enemy. Shared memories from the Wall for Sam and Jon, and King’s Landing for Tyrion and
Podrick.

Tyrion thought of those days in King’s Landing as some of his best, which was fucking sad when
he really thought about it. Daenerys had raised him as Hand based on his skill; his father had
pinned the office to him because he had no better options. His loyalty was to his queen, but so
many years of Lannister pride did not easily disappear.

Sam mentioned Sansa was becoming strangely interested in weapons. Specifically chemical
reactions to fire and what elements burn. It struck Tyrion as an odd thing. “Why?”

“That seems natural,” Jon said as he took another sip of ale. “We are in the middle of a war and an
eternal night, if you haven’t noticed.”

But Tyrion wondered, what did Sansa Stark need to know about weapons for?

Sansa oversaw the operation, not telling anyone what she was planning. Jon had enough on his
plate right now, so did the queen. Besides, it was only if all else failed and while it would be
generous to say they were winning, they weren’t exactly losing either. They were holding
Winterfell, and could continue to do so, for a time. Though Tyrion seemed to be following her
lately, she tried to tell herself she was just being paranoid, but she could swear he was there all the
time.

Just how much time is what worried Sansa. Soldiers fell each day, yet there always seemed to be
more mouths to feed.

A sudden chill spread in the room, causing Sansa to shiver. They tried to keep it warm, but winter
seemed stronger than their best efforts. She went over to where the wood stove was burning to heat
the room and threw another log in. Sansa noticed that they were running low. She would have to
send some men out for that, the elderly and crippled ones that couldn’t fight probably. But where
would she send them now that the godswood was burnt? Sansa closed her eyes to think.

“I know what you’re doing.”

The voice startled Sansa. She jumped and then whipped around, looking downward to see the man
who’d interrupted her thinking. “Bran!” she chastised.
Her brother wheeled over to her, his eyes studying her, not looking far off into some distance she couldn’t see like they were normally these days. He repeated, “I know what you’re doing.”

Sansa drew herself up. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She turned away, pretending to be busy tending to the fire.

“The black power, Sansa. You’re spreading it throughout Winterfell. Why? You saw what it does, what it’s capable of. With all the fire around here, one stray ember and Winterfell will be no more.”

Sansa knew that. She knew it was a risk. She stared into the flames she was pretending to tend, poking them with an iron rod. She thought of the Targaryens and their madness. Maybe it was the fire in their veins that made them go mad. It made them fierce, but it also burnt them from the inside out. Maybe the ones that didn’t go insane just had enough padding to burn through before their madness could escape.

“The Mad King did something similar. Did you know that? Few did. But I saw it. It’s why Jaime Lannister killed him. ‘Burn them all.’ Those were Aerys’ last words.”

Sansa looked at her brother, processing what he’d said. She knew no longer to take Bran’s words for fact, but she also knew that his insights into the past were accurate. Jaime Lannister and Aerys. Their father had been the one to find the Kingslayer on the Iron Throne. Had he known what had happened? She doubted it.

But why wouldn’t Jaime Lannister tell anyone that? Why not justify his actions?

It would have made him look weak, Sansa answered for herself. She had been in King’s Landing long enough to learn that excuses were nothing but covers for weaknesses. No one exposed a weakness in King’s Landing. Not if they planned on making it out alive.

Though it still hurt her to be compared to Aerys.

She pushed the feeling aside, it was natural anymore, hiding her true feelings. Sansa stiffened again, finding that nobility her mother had spent so long training into her. “It’s a last resort, when we’ve already evacuated. I will not let the dead take our home.”

Bran studied her. Sansa remembered how her mother had doted over Bran. Their parents had always claimed not to have favorites, but their children knew better. They were all loved, but Sansa had always guessed that Robb had been Ned’s favorite and Bran had been Catelyn’s.

Bran had assumed Sansa had been Catelyn's favorite, Arya their father’s.

“Why were you watching that?”

“I’m searching the past,” Bran’s eyes now regained that far-off look. “We need to find answers and I need to work my way back.”

Sansa bit her lip. “Be careful, Bran.” She wanted to caution him, as he’d made some serious errors lately, but she didn’t know how to do so. She missed her mother desperately in that moment. She would have known exactly what to say.

Sansa didn’t, so she just went over and hugged her little brother. Unlike that first time, this time, he hugged her back. If just a little and only for a moment.
It was later called the Battle of Winterfell, but the men and women who were there felt that name didn’t do what happened there justice. Days, weeks, of hard non-stop fighting wasn’t a battle, it was something else.

It almost seemed like they could win. They were keeping the wights back. More of the living dead fell than the living. It felt like they were winning, if just slightly.

Then the Night King came with his dragon.

Bonifer the Blessed turned out to be one of Jon’s best resources on how to defend in a siege. “The key is to make sure there is no way to break through your defenses, but there is a way to escape.”

Jaime Lannister and Jon had been seeing to that. The outer defenses were strong and there was an old path leading out of the castle for emergencies. It was narrow and the air was stall, but it would do. They were also trying to get accurate counts of just how many people were in Winterfell, as they spread the word on how to escape.

The attacks were beginning to come with less frequency. This both relieved and worried Jon. Were the attacks coming less because the Army of Dead was actually weakening? Or because it was preparing for its final blow?

Jon knew worrying about it wouldn’t help with anything. Though the cold fog that had surrounded Winterfell this day had worried him. He told Arya. “Tell all the troops to ready for battle.”

She frowned, but quick as a cat, rushed off to spread Jon’s message. Jon remember Hardenhall, remembered the unnatural fog that descended before the Night King and his army came. He shuddered and sent a second messenger to Dany. He knew Arya probably told the queen first, but he wanted her (and her dragons) ready to fight.

Or flee.

Jon didn’t really want Daenerys fighting at all, not where he couldn’t protect her. But he knew it would be pointless to try to argue with her. She wouldn’t listen, the dragons needed their rider, and he didn’t have the authority to order her.

Still he decided to look for her, despite sending two messengers. Though he kept his ears open, waiting for the (what he felt was) inevitable horn signalling the enemy.

Jon found Daenerys speaking with Grey Worm. She asked him, “Are the defenses sound, Lord Snow?”

“Aye,” he said. “There’s a fog surrounding Winterfell. I think they mean to attack soon. The white walkers and the Night King may be with the army.”

Daenerys nodded and asked softly, “Like it happened before?”

Jon nodded and Daenerys grasped his hand and squeezed it.
She looked to Grey Worm. “We are ready to receive them, your grace.”

She gave a bit of a smile that made Jon’s heart flutter, but then she ordered Grey Worm to see to his men. Left alone, or as alone as they could be in the courtyard, Daenerys looked to the sky. “I called them back, but the dragons were off hunting. I’m not sure how soon they’ll get here.”

Jon nodded. He had little left to say to Daenerys but he was never eager to leave her company. She bit her lip, which Jon found adorable, and she began to say, “Jon, there’s something I think I need to tell you…”

That was the moment the horn sounded. Jon prepared to run back to the walls and Daenerys followed, but before he could even begin to make the climb, he saw something in the air.

It wasn’t large, so it couldn’t be the dragon. It moved fast so Jon couldn’t get a good look at it before he realized whatever it was it was falling and coming for him and Dany. He moved her behind him, “Look out!”

The object fell and then rose. Its glowing blue eyes met Jon’s and he got out Longclaw. It was a wight. They were catapulting wights over the walls.

Jon dispatched the wight quickly, but he saw more falling and saw other struggling against the enemy inside their walls. He ran and cut down as many as he could. He lost track of Dany though she kept close to him. He wondered how many catapults the enemy must have for the wights were coming so quickly.

Some broke apart upon impact though that did little to slow them down. Jon spotted one half of a wight crawling after a screaming little girl. He lobbed off of its head and told the girl to get to safety.

That was the moment he heard it -- a screech of a dragon. At first the sound relieved him until he saw Daenerys’ even paler face.

“It’s Viserion,” Daenerys sad, bright eyes looking to the sky.

“Are you sure?” Jon cut down another wight, then another.

“A mother knows her child’s cries.”

Daenerys didn’t call for Drogon, but he showed up anyway. The dragons weren’t humans and sometimes even she couldn’t read their moods well, but she knew Drogon was both angry and sad. He missed his brother, and the mock Viserion crying out in the night sky...vengeance would be had.

Daenerys felt the same. She climbed aboard Drogon. She wondered where Rhaegal was, but knew her clever boy was probably ahead of them, either having already found a spot to ambush the demon that had dared enslave a dragon or was already bringing the fight to the Night King.

Drogon didn’t roar. In fact, he made almost no sound even as he cut through the wind. Daenerys tried to limit her noise as well. They were hunting. You didn’t give your prey the advantage of surprise.
It didn’t take long to find the one bit of white in another otherwise black sky. Drogon swooped down attempting to catch the Night King and his mount by surprise.

For the first time, Daenerys saw with her own eyes what the Night King had done to her sweet dragon. Viserion had had vivid green eyes that sparkled whenever he saw her or got to meet a new friend. He had been the nice friendly one, the sweetest of her dragons.

None of that was there now. His eyes glowed, but they were dead. Glazed over ice, just like his master.

A dragon was not a slave. “Dracarys,” Daenerys cried out even as Drogon attacked with his bright flames.

But the Night King steered to avoid them. He looked back at her, and their fight began -- flame against flame, a dance of dragons above the clouds.

The first time the blue flames touched her, Daenerys was surprised to feel the blizter from its freezing heat. Fire and heat had never bothered her before. But then Viserion was no longer a creature of fire. He was of ice now.

Daenerys felt her dragonblood stir, felt her anger rise up. Drogon reared back, trying to pluck out the dragon’s eye, as Daenerys clung to his spikes to stay on.

She wondered where Rhaegal was at when she saw the first javelin whiz by. She looked to the ground and saw the White Walkers who were throwing spears just as their master had to get the last dragon.

Reluctantly, Daenerys guided Drogon away from the fight. He resisted, but she knew they couldn’t afford to be reckless. But as she dived away, the Night King followed. Drogon was bigger, which meant the Night King had the advantage of speed. Daenerys knew it wouldn’t take long for his speed to overwhelm them, so she tried to outmaneuver the Night King.

It didn’t work.

Drogon took them lower, nearly touching the ground, until he rose up suddenly as a mound rose from the ground. Daenerys breathed a sigh of relief and then heard it behind her -- Rhaegal had appeared. He had covered himself with snow and he and his brother had devised a plan to capture their enemy.

Drogon turned and Daenerys could see it clearly now. Rhaegal had sprung up from the ground and sliced open the creature that had been Viserion’s belly. The dragon’s entrails spilled out, which made Daenerys sad, but she reminded herself that her dragon was gone. Only a body not allowed its peace remained.

Still the Night King’s mound fought Rhaegal. Daenerys could feel Drogon’s impatience to join the fight, to help his remaining brother, but there was no opportunity. Rhaegal snapped at the ice dragon, going for its neck but it twisted around and tried for Rhaegal’s instead. Her son whipped out of the way of the snapping jaws.

Daenerys cried out, trying to stop her son, but it was too late. In his haste, Rhaegal had whipped his tail back and it had crashed into Winterfell’s wall.

Her dragons had opened the first breech in Winterfell’s walls. She guided Drogon over, trying to plug it up by having him grab stones and pile them for a makeshift wall, but it was no use.
Not when she saw what was once Viserion push Rhaegal into another section of the wall, destroying it completely.

The sight had infuriated Drogon, who now burst forth, intending to rip apart the undead dragon, but sensing the turning battle the dragon took flight. Drogon chased it, but spears once again were thrown. Daenerys guided Drogon through as best she could. She hoped Rhaegal was following them, but she didn’t dare look back, didn’t dare break her concentration.

Then she heard the horn for retreat and it shattered her concentration anyway. She immediately wanted to find Jon. Had he fallen? Or was it just the wall being breached that caused the retreat? She nearly doubled over in pain at the thought of Jon dead.

She hadn’t even had a chance to tell him that she might be…

The spear sliced through Drogon’s wing, causing him to screech out in pain. Daenerys held on for dear life even as she tried to soothe Drogon, yelling comforting words in Valyrian as they went down. They landed hard.

Daenerys could hear shouting from the wall behind her, but she couldn’t make out what they were saying. Instead, she got off of Drogon, rushing to check on his wound.

This time there was nothing for her to pull out, but the spear had done its nasty work. Drogon’s wing now held a huge gash in it. It would take time to heal and she suspected he wouldn’t fly for awhile now.

Drogon growled and brought his broken wing around her. Daenery turned to see a White Walker and his wights closing in around her. Drogon immediately spat out flames, keeping the army at a distance. But Daenery felt the icy cold grip of fear take her. There were too many.

Then she heard the gate behind her open and she looked back to see her loyal Unsullied marching out to defend her. She tried to call out and tell them to go back, to save the people of Winterfell. But they either didn’t hear her or just didn’t listen.

The perfect soldiers -- refusing to obey their queen. Her heart went out to her brave men. They fought the dead to save her.

With Daenerys guidance, Drogon aimed his next blast of heat for the White Walker. The icy fog returned, blocking her dragon’s view, but still he blasted.

It must have worked, for the wights dropped.

Daenerys went to her men, looking at the dead and personally closing the eyes of all of the fallen. She heard one call out to her, “We must get you to safety, your grace.”

She ignored them. “We are retreating. Protect our flank and save yourselves.” Rhaegal landed and went to his brother. Drogon actually let his brother nuzzle him, comforting him for his injured wing.

Daenerys saw a new White Walker arrive on his horse. “Go,” she ordered the Unsullied.

That’s when she saw one Unsullied on the ground that made her drop to her knees even as tears filled her eyes.

Grey Worm.
He was still alive, but breathing harshly. Daenerys searched for help, calling out, but there was none to be found. She took her commander’s hands into her own. “Be still, I’m going to get help. We’re going to put you on Drogon and we’re going to get out of here.”

“No,” he said. “I die here. You must burn me and my brothers so I don’t come back. Please, my queen.”

“No,” Daenerys said. She looked at the wound, at the massive amount of blood leaking out of her friend and onto her furs. “No,” she repeated, as if she could order death to stop. She was a queen, how could she be so powerless?

Her dragons were spouting flames again, keeping the new group of wights and White Walkers back. Daenerys tried to move Grey Worm, but he refused her again. “No,” she cried out once more, as she could feel the tears leaking out.

He jutted out his chin and said, “This one was proud to serve Myssa, my queen.”

And with that, Grey Worm died, a free man.

To ensure he stayed that way, Daenerys went back to her dragons guided them to her fallen men and ordered, “Dracarys.”

The bodies burned and would not rise again. Daenerys climbed back onto Drogon who crawled away behind the Unsullied, covering their backs as they marched away. The army had agreed on a meeting place in case of retreat and they marched in that direction.

Rhaegal joined them from above, helping Drogon to keep the dead back with their fires.

On Drogon’s back, Daenerys clutched her stomach, cradling the babe she wasn’t even sure was there. She had done it again. Her own stupidity had killed her child before he or she had even had a chance to greet the world. How could she have done this again? How could she have sacrificed her baby for nothing? Drogo had died; Grey Worm had died; Winterfell had fallen. It was all her fault.

The air was so cold that Daenerys’ tears froze to her face.

Winterfell was chaos. The household guard did their best to keep the retreat orderly, but panic was rife and there was shoving and trampling, and it got to where Sansa could no longer watch. She could hear the battle still raging outside, knew Jon and the army would keep the dead at bay for as long as they could.

“Lady Stark,” Lord Tyrion cried out. “Lady Stark.” Sansa was touched that Tyrion thought to look for her, and clearly he’d been looking for awhile as he needed a moment to catch his breath. “Why are you not retreating yet?”

“I am Lady of Winterfell,” she explained. “I shall not leave until everyone else does.”

Tyrion frowned. “Jon is Warden. He can go down with the ship. Women and children, and dwarves I think, get to go on lifeboats.”

Sansa ignored him. She knew her duty, knew what had to be done. Lord Lannister would not get in
her way, she moved to walk away from him, but Tyrion grabbed her wrist. It didn’t hurt her the way his nephew had grabbed her, but it was a tight enough grip that she couldn’t free herself. “No, whatever you’re planning, have been planning. No.”

“Let go of me,” Sansa said.

“Is it wildfire? Are you planning to blow up all your enemies? You’ve learned much from Cersei.”

“How dare you,” Sansa growled. “How dare you compare me to that mad bitch of a sister you have.”

“I know you’re up to something. I know it’s not good.”

Sansa spotted her salvation in another looking for her. “Brienne!” The large lady knight looked relieved upon seeing her and rushed over. Ser Payne followed her. Despite no longer being her squire he still could often be found at her side.

Brienne immediately saw what Tyrion was doing and put her hand on the pommel of her sword. “Unhand her now.”

Podrick said nothing, but also looked worried.

Knowing he was beat, Tyrion let go. “Just be careful, Lady Stark. I would hate to lose you.” His words touched Sansa and made her wonder if she should rethink her plan, before her courage returned. No. She would never leave Winterfell again. Tyrion turned to Podrick, “Come on, Ser Payne. You can protect me, make sure I don’t get trampled in the stampede leaving here.” He turned to look at Sansa once more. He gave her a little bow and said, “I wish you good fortune in the wars to come.”

The two men left. Brienne said, “We should be leaving too, my lady.”

“Go Brienne of Tarth,” Sansa said, looking around her home. Its stone walls, its tapestries, and filled with her memories. The dead would not find a home here. Not while she breathed. “I release you from your service.”

Brienne shifted her weight, frowning. Then she said, “No, I gave my word to your mother. I would protect and I will.”

“You tried to protect me once before and I didn’t listen then. I won’t listen now either.”

“And how did that turn out for you?” Brienne lost her temper. “Lady Stark, I failed you once before. I will not do it again. I promised your lady mother would protect her children, and I will honor that pledge.”

Catelyn. Her children. Bran. Sansa suddenly remembered. How was he getting out of here? The escape tunnel was too narrow for his chair. “Have you seen my brother?”

Brienne frowned. “Lord Snow is…”

“Not Jon,” Sansa interrupted. “Bran. Where is he? Is he getting out?”

Brienne understood and nodded. “Come with me.” They raced down the corridors of Winterfell, looking for Sansa’s brother. They called out his name and asked everyone they came across if they’d seen him, before telling them to evacuate. No one had. Where could he be?
Sansa felt the panic rise up. Where was he? Where was her brother? Where was Bran?

They finally found him in the burnt remains of the godswood. He was staring at the weirwood tree, grasping it, trying to regain his visions. Sansa wasted no time, she ordered Brienne to pick up Bran and get out of there. She didn’t bother to listen to Bran’s protests, she instead listened

They were inside now.

Sansa had to get to the crypts. Brienne began to run and Sansa followed her until she reached the crypt entrance and she turned to go in. But Brienne must have noticed and stopped. Sansa answered the unspoken question, “I swore I’d never leave Winterfell again. Now go.”

Brienna began, “My lady…”

“That’s an order.” She looked into Bran’s eyes. “The pack survives.”

She would never see her favorite brother again.

The White Walkers came in. They rose the ranks of the fallen to join their own. Unsullied, Dothraki, Stark men, Lannister men, all become one mind, one united army. Their numbers swelled as Winterfell was overrun.

All it took to create perfect unity was death.

Sansa Stark looked into her father’s eyes. Or his statue’s at least. Arya was right. It really didn’t look anything like him. It didn’t capture his warmness. His quiet, steady presence. It didn’t capture the essence of the man she loved.

She heard a noise in the distance. They were coming. She wondered if they sensed her or what was coming for them.

It didn’t matter. They would come. Lured into her trap. She would never leave her home again. Never be the victim to someone else’s abuse. Sansa Stark was Lady of Winterfell. She was the daughter of a great Lady and Lord. She was a wolf.

She would protect her family and her home. She would rather die than see it fall into evil hands.

She hadn’t lied to Tyrion. They didn’t have wildfire this far north. She had to make due with other materials. She had quizzed Sam for weeks. She didn’t know if he ever suspected her purpose, but he hadn’t held any information back.

She didn’t allow it.

The barrels had been placed around Winterfell. The Keep wouldn’t survive the blast, but nothing else would either.
Sansa thought of her noble father and mother. She hoped they would be proud of her.

She turned and saw blue eyes looking at her in the darkness. She recognized the creature that stood before her. Jon had told her everything. This was no mindless wight. This was a White Walker.

Sansa felt the bone-deep cold settle over her. She was flooded with terrible memories: of Joffrey, of nearly getting raped in King’s Landing, of “uncle” Petyr’s affections, of Ramsay’s cruelties.

She stabbed the dragonglass dagger into her thigh to focus herself again. She would not break. She watched as the White Walker reached its hand out to touch her forehead. Its pointed nail as threatening as any knife.

Sansa remembered what Jon told her, how to prevent coming back as one of those things, how to kill one. She first lunged with the dagger, but the creature merely dodged the blow, seemingly amused. Sansa tried once more and failed again. She had fallen down.

She was at her father’s feet again. She looked up to her father one last time before closing her eyes and reaching for the lit lamp she’d hidden earlier. She could hear the White Walker behind her, but it was too late. He hadn’t noticed the powder at his feet. Black powder that exploded when lit. Powder that had been spread throughout these crypts and Winterfell to ensure its destruction along with whatever dead creatures filled it.

The lone wolf dies, but the pack survives. Sansa opened her eyes, standing and turning to face her foe. The White Walker looked triumphant until he saw what was in her hand.

With a sly grin that Margaery Tyrell would have been proud of, Sansa dropped the lamp at the beginning line that would set off a chain reaction throughout Winterfell.

To save Winterfell, Sansa Stark burnt it to the ground in a fiery explosion.

Chapter End Notes

I’m so sorry. I like Sansa and I hope she gets a happy ending in canon, as the poor girl has suffered enough, but I’m not sure if she’s going to make it until the end. Though I do believe if Sansa does die in the series, she will make her mother proud and go out with the same brave fierceness as Catelyn Stark. She always has been her mother’s daughter after all.

That goes double for Grey Worm. I hope he and Missandei live happily ever after and adopt a pack of children who were orphaned during the Battle for the Dawn. But as a soldier, I don’t think his chances of survival are great.

I’m avoiding spoilers for the new season, so please don’t mention anything in the comments. I’m sorry I don’t have time to reply to them, but I do read and appreciate them. But now that we have a start date for the new season, I will be attempting to finish this story before then. I will struggle to finish otherwise because it’s hard for me to do so once I have canon. Though I don’t have a great track record with writing on tight deadlines, there’s just not enough hours in the day. But I will do my best before April.
Hopelessly Hopeful

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

For once, luck was on their side and the weather held. The snow had been more sporadic as they made their way to Cerwyn, a half-day’s journey from Winterfell. From there, they would take boats to White Harbor, if they could.

Bran had thought that he’d moved passed feelings that he was the Three-Eyed Raven now to the exclusion of all else.

But he was wrong. He shed tears for Sansa. Not as some mythical entity, but as a boy mourning his big sister. Sansa had always looked out for him, always spoiled him and doted on him. Sneaking him treats from the kitchen when no one else was looking. Babying him when his brothers (and Arya) kept on him to toughen up. Never losing patience with him the way Robb and Jon did when he was learning to read, going over each word with him until he got it right.

His big sister, the spitting image of his beloved mother, was gone. And he was heartbroken over the loss.

He thought that if he hadn’t been crippled, he might have been able to stop her. He and Brienne would’ve been able to carry her and force her away. But maybe not. Sansa had been determined.

Still, Bran could see and relive her moment of sacrifice, and gods help him, he kept doing it. Going back and watching her hair form a red halo around her face as the explosion engulfed Winterfell.

Brienne wanted to look for Jon and Arya, but Bran resisted. He wasn’t ready to face them, wasn’t ready to tell them what had happened. Neither of them had been particularly close to Sansa, but he still didn’t want to see the crestfallen look they’d get at their family shrinking further.

Arya found him first, of course. Bran hadn’t even heard her approach, just felt the arms tight around him and heard her relief, “You’re alive, brother.”

Bran hugged her back. His eyes darted as he waited for the question. Arya didn’t disappoint, she immediately asked, “Have you seen Sansa? I haven’t been able to find her.”

He looked to Brienne, who bravely stepped forward and said, “Lady Stark stayed behind to protect Winterfell. She refused our offer to take her to safety. She was honorable and a hero.”

Arya didn’t seem to understand at first, but then it hit her. She was devastated, Bran wanted to look away but found he couldn’t. Arya, who was another person Bran hadn’t known was still capable of it, began to cry. She hadn’t been close to Sansa, they had fought more than anything, but they had still been sisters. Still been the two Stark girls. It had been a connection that didn’t mean nothing.

Bran searched for words of comfort, for anything, but his mind was blank. He couldn’t comfort himself over the loss, how could he bring peace to his sister? Suddenly, he longed for Jon. His older brother would know what to do. Ned, Robb and Jon had always known what to do, even when Bran didn’t. To his shame, his voice broke as he asked, “Do you know where Jon is?”

Arya nodded and led them to their commander. As they made their way to him, they passed by Jaime Lannister, who looked tired. His handsome face was covered in soot and grime. Brienne clearly wanted to go to him, but when Bran gave her leave, she refused to abandon the Stark
children, citing her oath that was surely fulfilled by now.

Bran thought about Jaime Lannister as the strong lady knight forced his wheeled chair over the uneven land. He had started this all. The Kingslayer had started them all down this path when he’d thrown Bran from that window, attempting to kill him. Bran had rewatched that scene many times now, seeing all he hadn’t before, now understanding what he hadn’t before.

He’d looked into the man’s past, wanting to know more about the man who’d tried to kill him but crippled him instead. Bran might hate him. Truly hate him in a way he didn’t realize he was capable of. Bran clung to the emotion, desperate to feel anything but the overwhelming grief he had for Sansa.

But it all came rushing back at the sight of Jon. When he spotted Arya and Bran, Jon was visibly relieved, rushing over to them despite his aides calling after him. He wrapped both of them in a fierce hug. “You’re okay,” he repeated.

When he let go, he pulled back and then asked, “Where’s Sansa?”

No one met his eyes and that was enough for Jon. He nodded sadly. Unlike Bran and Arya, Jon shed no tears, more used to battles and the losses they brought. He kept a hand on each of his siblings, for their comfort and reassurance, reminding Bran of his father. Jon was so like Ned, maybe more so than any of Ned’s natural children. Bran wondered what Rhaegar Targaryen would have thought of that. He knew Lyanna Stark would have been proud of her boy and her brother. For she had loved them both.

They stood in silence for a moment, still connected, but lost in their own thoughts. Then Jon inhaled deeply and asked, “What happened?”

Bran found himself explaining the whole tale without any emotion. He could feel the three-eyed raven taking over again, and wondered if Jon hadn’t done it on purpose to give them both a professional persona to hide behind. Jon, it turned out, had barely made it out of Winterfell in time. He’d been close enough to feel the heat of the flames, had watched his home get destroyed.

When they had finished talking, someone was calling for Jon, wanting to bring their older brother back to his duty. But he set it aside, hugging Arya and Bran to him once more, as the three of them felt the deep loss of Sansa together.

Bran began to cry.

Drogon was tired when they finally reached Cerwyn. Daenerys patted her son. “You’re not used to walking any more.”

He seemed to nod in response and as Daenerys climbed down, Rhaegal cuddled in closer to his big brother. It spoke to how much Drogon pain must have been in that he let his little brother comfort him.

Daenerys patted her dragon, inspecting the wound as much as Drogon would let her. The slice was terrible but seemed straight enough that Daenerys hoped it would heal quickly. She inspected the edges for any signs of infection. She bent down to collect clean snow to wash the wound.
Drogon screeched at the coldness, but Daenerys ignored his pain. She told him in Valyrian that it was for his own good and soothed him between each bit of snow. When she finished, Daenerys patted Drogon again and finally looked around.

She had been given a wide berth by the retreating army, which made sense considering Drogon’s cries. But still, she looked for her advisors or Jon or anyone familiar. She wished Grey Worm could have been here with her, but the thought of him, brought tears to her eyes. Her brave soldier -- he had deserved a lifetime of happiness with the woman he’d loved, not a death in this cold land.

She tried to put it aside, as many died in war, but she couldn’t stop her tears. Daenerys began to sob, now glad only her children were here to see her. She brought her hand to her stomach. “Was this your doing, little one?” she thought. She normally had more control than this, but she remember from her first pregnancy that her emotions had been harder to control then too.

Daenerys panicked at the thought that perhaps she had lost the baby with the fall, but she knew such worry would only make it worse, so she tried to force herself to calm down. It didn’t work.

When Tyrion and Missandei finally found her, Daenerys was lying in front of her dragons. Their hot breath kept her warm, melted the snow around her and turned the grass to ash. When Daenerys rose she was covered with soot. Tyrion raised an eyebrow, but Missandei noticed her queen’s wound. “Your grace, you’re injured.”

Daenerys tried to wave it off, but her advisors insisted she get treatment. Tyrion covered her hair even more with soot, while Missandei found less expensive clothes to cover Daenerys in so that they might disguise their queen’s identity, not wanting any rumors to spread.

Daenerys waited in a tent until Missandei came in with a healer, an old woman with a wrinkled face and white hair braided down her back. She looked Daenerys up and down, clearly not impressed. She turned to Missandei, “This is your friend?”

Missandei nodded and the old woman stepped closer. “My name’s Aisha,” the woman introduce herself with. She didn’t wait for Daenerys’ name, grabbing the queen’s face and examining the wound. “I’m not a maester but a midwife, but I can tell that’s going to need to be stitched up.” She turned back to Missandei. “Get a needle and thread as well as something for the pain. Milk of the poppy, if there’s any available.”

Daenerys interjected, “I’ll be fine. Save the supplies for those who really need it.”

This caused Aisha’s eyebrow to raise, but Missandei obeyed, leaving to find what was requested of her. Alone now, Aisha looked more closely at her patient. Daenerys didn’t meet the old woman’s eyes, not wanting to expose herself. But the old woman seemed to come to the revolution anyhow, her eyes widening before she could stop herself.

Daenerys prepared for the bowing, but Aisha did no such thing, instead she shook her head. “How far along are you, lass?”

Daenerys’ breath stopped. She had known, but still...she felt the awful loss of Rhaego flood into her as though it happened yesterday. She couldn’t go through that again, not with Jon’s baby. Her eyes filled with tears once more.

Clearly used to such outbursts, Aisha continued, “Shouldn’t be in the battle, lass. I don’t care what the king says. Your husband is probably pitching a fit about it. Having his pregnant wife on a battlefield.”
Daenerys’ denied it, uselessly. “I’m not pregnant.”

“Oh, you didn’t know. That explains it.” The older woman took her hand. “You’re pregnant, dear.”

“No I’m not.” There was a shrillness to her voice that might have worried her if visions of the son she’d never held weren’t filling her head. A dead baby her imagination was giving glowing blue eyes.

“I’ve been doing this since I was a girl. You are about two or three months along. You’ll probably begin to really show soon.”

That nagging suspicion that had crept up on her the past few weeks was finally confirmed. Daenerys nearly cursed at the cruelty of this information. She hoped for a child for years, only for it arrive at the worst possible time.

Then again, the baby hasn’t arrived, not until you hold him or her in your arms, she thought.

Sensing Daenerys mood wasn’t joyful, the older woman added, “Oh dear. You’re not married are you? Well, you’re a pretty thing. Move a few leagues away, tell your next man that your husband died in the war. Only good thing about these damn wars, easy to explain away awkward situations.”

Daenerys couldn’t stop her crying. It was too much. How could she bear this? She couldn’t. She wouldn’t be able to take it. Rhaegar had been devastating, but Jon’s child? To have his son or daughter whither in her broken womb? To present him with a stillborn? She could never do it. She hadn’t the strength.

The witch had said she would not birth a living child. Her mother had miscarried so many children in her efforts to give Rhaegar a sister-wife. She had died when Daenerys finally arrived.

The sobs began to shake her tiny frame. The older woman comforted her, as she would any young mother-to-be. Daenerys almost loved the impersonal touch.

But what she really longed for was a mother she’d never known. Daenerys felt like a child again, longing to bury her tear-streaked face into a mother’s breast. She attempted to quiet again, remembering how Viserys used to hit and scream at her whenever he caught her crying. “We don’t have a mother because of you, you weakling. I would trade a thousand of you for her.”

Daenerys attempted to control herself. Dragons do not cry. The withered hand stayed on her forearm. A comfort. Daenerys took several deep breaths. She was a dragon. Dragons do not cry. They are creatures of fire, not water.

What of the child? It will be a dragon too. It will cry. Only dead children don’t cry.

Daenerys repressed the thought, as well as the desperate hope. It was too dangerous to think such things. To imagine her life, married to Jon, the dead defeated, and their living child in her arms. Good things like that didn’t happen to her, and if they did, they only lasted long enough to hurt so much when they were ripped away.

Missandei returned. She handed the healer the requested items and then hugged Daenerys to her chest, comforting her. “What’s wrong, my…” Missandei cut off the word queen, glancing at the other woman in the room, who was currently threading the needle. “…my friend?”

Daenerys couldn’t speak, so Aisha told Missandei about the queen’s condition. The healer then made Daenerys look at her. “I need you to calm for me. It will hurt more if you move.”
Missandei said, “This child is not Rhaego. This child is a fighter for life, like his parents.”

Daenerys attempted to stop her sobs, as the old woman questioned, “Rhaego?”

Daenerys answered, “My firstborn. He never took a breath.”

Aisha nodded, full of compassion. “I’ve seen many woman miscarry their first and go on to have many children after without complication.”

“Theyir wombs weren’t cursed.”

“Oh child, you are too old to believe such nonsense.” The wrinkled hand wiped away a tear.

Daenerys replied, “We battle an army of dead men with resurrected dragons. Much nonsense seems to be true these days.”

Aisha nodded. “Yes, that is true. But dragons have always been real, and the stories of the living dead persisted throughout the ages. And the gods saw to it that the Dragon Queen fell in love with the King in the North so that she would protect us all.”

Daenerys nearly laughed at the version of the story the small folk knew. “The queen is protector of the realm, wouldn’t she have come anyway?”

“Perhaps,” the midwife conceded. “But love will bring comfort to both rulers at this time. It always does. Now, hold still.” The woman began to stitch Daenerys’ wound.

Daenerys thought about the woman’s words. Maybe she was right. Maybe their love and their child was meant to give Daenerys and Jon much needed hope in this desperate hour. Her hand drifted to her belly again. She and Jon had been fighting just to live for all of their lives, now they could fight for the life growing inside of her, for the future of the Targaryen line.

The healer finished her stitching and then looked over her world. With a satisfied nod, she stood, her old bones cracking. “I must go.” She smiled. “Take care, child. You will find a man of honor to make an honest woman of you.”

Daenerys already had. She had found the most honorable she’d ever known, but she couldn’t have him. Couldn’t bind him to her barren womb. She knew Jon would fight her on her wise decision, knew it would be hard to deny him, but she would have to. For the sake of their family and their duty, she must find the strength to stand firm.

But what of this babe? What if she managed to carry it? Then what? She was so confused and conflicted. Her heart desperately wanting what her mind told her she could not have.

Missandei came up to her, holding her hand. “My queen,” she said. Her dear friend knew immediately that something was wrong. “What is wrong? You can marry your king now.”

Daenerys could feel the tears return, far too easily. She looked at Missandei and put aside her own problems. “My friend, I’m afraid I have some bad news.” Daenerys told her of Grey Worm’s death, how he was brave and free to the end.

Missandei absorbed the painful blow with a stoicism that only a former slave could possess. If was so ingrained for Missandei to hide her heartbreak and pain that she did so even when it wasn’t necessary. Still, Daenerys understood that her advisor felt the loss deeply.

Missandei put her own pain aside, coming back to her first point. “The child is a gift from the
gods,” Missandei said.

Daenerys repeated words she’d heard from Tyrion when he’d been drinking. “The gods are cunts.”

“But they can be kind. They were kind when they sent Daenerys Stormborn to conquer Astapor to free me and the man I loved.”

“Only for you to lose him.” Daenerys regretted the words the instant she saw the pain cross Missandei’s face, her head bowed down. She reached for her friend, as they were both pained by the loss of a lover and a commander. “I am so sorry.”

Missandei looked up again. “I’m not. I got to love him. We had time together. We loved. Love is a gift. Only fools throw away such a gift. And you are no fool, my queen.”

Daenerys smiled sadly. “You are the wisest person I know. Have I ever told you that?”

Missandei smiled softly. “Many times.”

Daenerys hugged Missandei, cradling her friend to her breast. Missandei didn’t cry -- Daenerys wondered if some cruel master had trained that out of her -- but she could feel the sadness emanating just the same. And she accepted the comfort her queen offered, which was telling enough. Daenerys stroked Missandei’s hair and remembered a song from her youth. She didn’t remember where she’d heard it, but she had sung it to herself when Viserys was being particularly vicious.

\[Sōnar simontan yknagon hae iā vājigon\]
\[gaomis daor mazverdagon lēda iēdar se vēzos\]
\[yn rŷ dōron se skoriot daor vala iksis\]
\[pōnta rūklon skoriot tolie dakogon\]

\[Sōnar simontan glaesagon gō qopsa\]
\[gevie se rāpa korzion\]
\[pōnta mazverdagon skoriot konir iksis daor ābrar\]
\[qopsa tegun, rāpa renigon\]

“You’ll be a good mother, my queen,” Missandei said.

Daenerys felt the tears prickle in her eyes. Even in her sorrow, her friend could think of her. “Thank you,” she said. Daenerys kissed Missandei’s forehead and gave her one final hug.

Then she went to find Jon.
Jon wasn’t sure he’d ever get used to the respect that was now his due. He’d been a lord for years, a king for only a few months, but still it was strange to see servants bow as he passed by. For other lords to give him their nicest guest rooms. He stood in front of a massive fireplace in Cerwyn thinking of the tiny room that had been his in Winterfell during his youth. He never could have imagined his future, he had never been that creative.

Winterfell was gone now, along with Sansa. Jon had kept putting the pain aside, as he had needed to keep going, organizing the retreat as commander. He’d been attending to his duties all day. Now he stood and stared into the flames of the fire as he attempted to give himself permission to finally grieve. But no tears came, only a deep sadness and a slight hope.

Daenerys lived, he knew. He hadn’t seen her yet. Didn’t know where she was. He desperately wanted to go to her, wanted to find her, but something kept him here. Some deep instinct told him that he must wait for her to knock on his door tonight. He wasn’t sure why he thought this, but he already had the glass of wine poured for her when she arrived. He wasn’t sure if Tyrion’s bad habits were rubbing off on her or if it was just the stresses of war and forcing her mind to settle, but she always liked a glass of wine before bed.

Strange that he hadn’t even known her 6 months ago, now he knew her habits as well as his own. Then, maybe it wasn’t so strange. After all, every relationship started somewhere.

Jon inhaled deeply. He was already missing Sansa, as organizing had seemed so much harder than usual without her talents to help. Part of him worried that he might have saved her, drug her away from Winterfell, but he knew he wouldn’t have either. He could only honor her and her sacrifice now, and considering that the Night King and his army hadn’t followed the retreating army, it had been worth it.

Still, Sansa might have had a better plan on what to next. They were preparing boats to flee to White Harbor to join up again with the Dothraki that had left as well as Dany’s forces coming from the Essos. Jon tried to picture a map of Westeros, where would be the best spot to defend against the dead?

The Neck. Another Wall. The plan began to roughly form in Jon’s mind. He would need to speak with Tyrion and the queen about logistics, but he thought he knew what to do next.

That settled, Jon relaxed a bit, or as much as he could. Davos had given him preliminary numbers, and the losses had been too high. The Unsullied had taken the biggest hit, their numbers were halved, but the northern forces had lost over a third of their strength, including the Free Folk. Jon knew that those were losses they couldn’t afford, especially as they now joined the Night King’s ranks.

But perhaps not, thanks to Sansa. Perhaps the explosion and fire had destroyed those bodies for the Night King. Jon smiled at the thought, clever Sansa. He would miss her so. He would see her honored.

There was a soft knock at his door. Jon strode over in three steps to answer it himself. He prayed it wasn’t Davos with more bad news.

For once, his prayers were answered as he looked into Dany’s violet eyes. Her hand was still up in a fist, posed to knock again. She seemed startled by Jon’s sudden appearance. Without speaking, Jon let her into his chambers.
Daenerys walked in, seeming as nervous as he had on the boat. Jon braced himself for whatever bad news she was about to deliver. Daenerys walked over to the fireplace, pacing in front of it. She rubbed her hands together and began to tell him something before stopping herself.

Finally, Jon stepped into her path, forcing her to stop. She looked up at him and just blurted out, “I’m pregnant.”

Jon had been expecting troop numbers or an update on her dragons, so it took a moment for him to even process her words. Pregnant. What did that word mean?

When it hit him, the meaning, the overarching implications, the everything, he grinned. He looked to her belly. “Truly?” he asked, as if afraid she was playing a cruel joke on him.

Daenerys barked out a laugh. She took his hand and placed it on her stomach, which Jon now noticed was rounded. She whispered, “You’re going to be a father, Jon.”

Jon felt his heart swell. He had always dreamed of it, but it had always been so out of reach for a bastard like him. Then when he joined the Night’s Watch, he knew the possibility was gone for good. Even as king, when such a thing was to be expected, it was so low on his list of concerns, he never gave it much thought until he met her. Then his dreams of fatherhood became more detailed, as he could give his imaginary children full forms. He knew the possibilities. Her lips and eyes, her hair color, how their son or daughter might look.

Jon’s hand caressed Daenerys, and their child. He was going to be a father. It was no longer a dream. Here it was, the proof of his love for this woman. He barely even knew where to start, his first words ended up being, “Thank you.”

Daenerys seemed bemused. “What?”

“Thank you, I never thought...never imagined...Daenerys, I love you. That you love me back. That we’re to have a child...I never thought…” Jon could feel the tears finally break free, and he attempted to hold them back. He brushed them away with his free hand, as he refused to move his other hand from his wife and child.

Daenerys would be his wife. He knew that now. They would marry in White Harbor, under the weirtree there. He would no longer entertain her or Tyrion’s suggestions about politics or whatever bollocks they came up with. She was his. He was hers. And it was time to make that clear to the world.

He leaned in and kissed her gently. Daenerys kissed him back, just as softly. She broke away, “It may not...” she swallowed a sob. “I’ve lost a son. I don’t want you to hope…”

Jon placed a finger to her lips. “Don’t worry, my love. We will meet whatever the gods have planned for us together.” He smiled softly at her as he rested his forehead against hers. He rubbed her belly once more. A child. Jon would be a father. He closed his eyes, afraid he might sob.

Daenerys leaned into him, “You were right.”

Jon pulled back, his other hand cupping his wife’s face. And she would be his wife. He would see to that. He looked into her eyes as he said, “Marry me. I don’t care about the politics or the future, just be with me.”

Daenerys smiled. “I do. I care about the future.” She looked away from him, eyes welling with tears. “Grey Worm is dead.”
Jon looked down solemnly, “Aye, I know. Sansa too.” He thought of the young girl with the bright red hair he played with in Winterfell and his heart ached. She deserved so much better than what this life had given her.

Daenerys clasped his hand, giving him what comfort she could. “Do you know how Grey Worm became my commander? Did I tell you how I gave the Unsullied a choice?” Jon nodded, and Daenerys continued. “He died a free man, protecting me.” Tears escaped her eyes and Jon used his free hand to wipe them away, refusing to remove the one from her belly. “He died for me. I can’t…” She cut off before looking into Jon’s eyes. “I can’t lose you. I couldn’t bare it. Oh, Jon, I…” She hugged him to her, clinging almost desperately. Jon let her. Gods, how he loved her. She whispered against his chest, “I feel I’ve known you a lifetime.”

Jon hugged her and kissed her forehead, before pushing her away just enough so he could look at her. “I love you, Daenerys Targaryen. I’ve loved you since before I knew you. And I will not spend another day apart from you. Let your advisors tell you it’s wrong, I don’t care. We could die tomorrow. I will marry you. I will spend every moment I can get with you until my last.”

“Our last,” Daenerys corrected. “I will not be parted from you, Jon Snow.” She went to her tiptoes and Jon accepted her kiss. When she was on her feet again, Daenerys said, “Our family…Our family cannot end with us. Not if we can prevent it.”

“It’s not.” Jon placed his other hand atop her barely present bump. “It’s not ending. It’s just beginning.”

“Our timing is terrible.” Her hands went over his.

“Our timing has always been terrible. I wish I would have meet you so much sooner. Not when the world is ending.”

She smiled, not quite sadly, “The gods are cunts.”

Jon smiled. He leaned forward, resting his forehead on hers. “With a cruel sense of humor.” His eyes looked into hers. “But then they give you one perfect moment that makes all the bullshit worth it.”

“For a man who claims to be terrible with words, you can be quite good with them, Jon Snow.” She pulled back to look at him. “Or would you prefer Stark? Or Targaryen?”

Jon smiled a little. “I don’t care about my name. I only want you.”

“And you will have me,” Daenerys said. “For as long as you want me, as I will want you forever and always.”

“Always and forever,” Jon confirmed. He caught her lips with his own. He kissed her as though he might never get to again.

His hands brushed over her curves, a familiar journey by now, but Jon was happy for the familiarity. It had never happened for him before. He’d loved Ygritte, but he’d always known it wasn’t a lasting love. There had always been that loneliness even when still in her arms. But Daenerys, he knew he’d spend the rest of his days with her. He knew there would never be another, come what may. He would never tire of her, of this, no matter how many times they repeated the motions.

He would never stop loving her. As Jon kissed her, he knew even if she never agreed to the marriage, even if Tyrion somehow talked to her about alliances and politics and the good of the
realm, he would never do this with another woman. Daenerys would mother his children or he would have none.

Jon’s hands again went to her rounded belly. Their child. Proof of their love. Jon could feel his heart expand, making room for this child he didn’t yet know. He’d held Daenerys when she cried telling him about Rhaego, but it wasn’t until this moment he truly understood her pain. He could the fear creep in -- he was to be a father.

But before the thought could take him, Daenerys caught his earlobe between her teeth. She tugged and licked and Jon groaned. He guided her to his bed.

Then he hesitated. How did one make love to a pregnant woman? Would it hurt the baby? Clearly, he had sleep with Daenerys since getting her pregnant and she was fine, but now his mind presented scenarios where he somehow hurt her or their child.

Daenerys seemed to pick up on his apprehension, kissing him and whispering, “It won’t hurt us, Jon. You would never hurt us.” She pulled him down, laying him down and taking the lead.

Jon was grateful for it. His hands touched every inch of skin Daenerys presented to him. Her skin was mostly flawless but every now and again his hands would brush over a silvery scar, nothing compared to his own, but it still enraged him that anyone would dare harm this woman. His woman.

He sat up, taking her mouth with his own. Their tongues danced and dueled, as Daenerys’s hands ghosted over his chest, going down his body with a gentleness that Jon never thought he would deserve. When she cupped and stroked him, Jon broke off the kiss to exhale and shudder. Daenerys guided him to look at her as she positioned him and then fell upon him.

Jon felt complete inside of her. He kissed her again, one hand caressing her face as his other went again to their growing child. Their child. Jon still could believe it. His hips matched her rhythm and he thrusted up into as gently as he could manage. He may have lost Winterfell, but his home was here in this tent with him.

They went slowly, for what felt like hours. When Daenerys began to tire, Jon rolled her beneath him, taking control.

They ended together and Jon rested on top of her. His head on her chest and his hand still stroking her belly, he felt better than he could ever remember. Daenerys stroked his curls. As Jon felt sleep pull him under, he heard his love ask, “How do you think we’ll be remembered?”

“How do you think people will remember us? I mean, Aegon the Conqueror is the most famous Targaryen of them all, yet no one really remembers the man, just his deeds. No one really knows what his likes, his interests, or his hobbies were. They say he married Visenya out of duty and Rhaenys out of love, visited the younger 10 times more than the elder, but who knew his heart really? He never wrote his wives poetry or declared his love with anything but faithfulness. They will remember our deeds and titles, but they won’t know this. They won’t know about these moments. They won’t know how we cuddled and comforted each other between battles. No one will write songs or ballads about how I feel stronger with you by my side. Or how I adore it when you refuse to smile with teeth, but your eyes crinkle up instead. Or how you tolerate me braiding your hair even though you take it out before anyone can see it.”

Jon moved his head to answer, “If this is your attempt to get me to write you poems, I’ll tell you
now that I’ll do it for you, but I’ll be absolute shit at it.”

Daenerys laughed, a wonderful sound to Jon’s ears after such recent sorrows. She bent down to kiss his forehead. “I don’t need poetry. I just want you. Forever and always.”

Jon raised himself, looking Daenerys in the eyes, his expression even more serious than usual. “You’ll have me. Forever and always.”

Daenerys leaned forward, kissing Jon filthily. She climbed into his lap and Jon’s arms wrapped around her, his hands grabbing the globes of her ass.

The king and queen got little sleep that night.

Tyrion did not enjoy boat rides, he decided. He hated how the ground swayed beneath him even when he was stone sober. He hated how the quarters were cramped and everything moved despite being bolted down. He hated how he couldn’t escape anyone he wanted to in such close quarters.

He hated how he always ended up in a room next to his queen when she’d decided to fuck the ever-living brains out of Jon Snow, and he got to hear every gods-forsaken moan. Bronn had pointed out his attraction to the queen, which Tyrion couldn’t deny. Some of his unpleasantness was just jealousy, but mostly it was the headache the whole endeavour gave him a headache.

First of all, he would probably owe Varys a favor when he returned. Jon Snow had refused to marry another and had now thoroughly convinced the queen of the same, despite Tyrion’s very well-reasoned arguments. But neither could be moved, and the wedding would happen at White Harbor as soon as possible.

The confirmation of the queen’s pregnancy gave Tyrion some relief, as the succession might be decided if the babe lived. Plus it made the marriage a wise move rather than a rash one driven by changeable emotions, queens didn’t have bastards, after all. Kings could and often did, but queens were never allowed their lustful follies.

“Lord Lannister,” someone interrupted Tyrion’s thoughts. He turned to see a messenger, who handed him a scroll. “A message for you, sir.”

Tyrion took the parchment and gave the boy the only moneypiece he had, a gold dragon. It was too much, but Tyrion had always been rich and didn’t mind being generous. He unfurled the scroll and read the message.

It was from Bronn. He’d been successful in capturing an alchemist and wanted further instruction. Tyrion would need a map of the North to arrange a meeting place, possibly some tavern in White Harbor.

He was so absorbed in his plans, Tyrion didn’t notice the man approach. His cat-like silent steps probably helped, but Tyrion was startled when he heard his brother’s voice. “It’s good to see you made it out alive.”

Tyrion glared at his brother. He wanted to say something mean in return, about how he wished Jaime had died, but he couldn’t do it. He was happy to see his brother lived. Gods, help him. He still loved his family, even after anything. He sighed, “You too.”
Jaime gave a small smile, which Tyrion ignored. He didn’t know what to say to his brother. He wasn’t ready to forgive, but he was tired of being alone. He missed his family. He missed women. He missed his old life.

Gods, he needed a drink.

Jaime snorted. “You look just like Cersei when she needs a drink. You both get that same look of desperation.”

Tyrion wasn’t thrilled to have anything in common with his bitch of a sister. He quipped, “I would settle for sex. Do have the same look as our sister for that? You would know what Cersei looks like when she desperately wants some.”

Jaime ducked his head, clearly hurt by the jab. Tyrion wasn’t sure he cared. He looked to his brother, this man who’d lost everything trying to do the right thing. Tyrion’s jaw ticked before he closed his eyes. Then he said, “You know, I’ve always hated Cersei. I have many good reasons to. My mind screams at me to turn against my family as you have all turned against me since my birth. It’s logical. I know it’s right. But I can’t stop…” Tyrion cut himself off. He couldn’t stop feeling. He wanted to, desperately, but he couldn’t.

“But then I dined with Myrcella’s killer. That never felt right either.”

Jaime listened, offering none of his usual witisms or quips. He said, “Family is hard. Ours especially, but I think all families are. Loyalty is so important, but sometimes you end up loving people you don’t even like. I was a shit father, but I miss my kids. They didn’t deserve…”

Tyrion said, “It may have been for the best. I doubt they would have lived through this anyhow. My queen is no fool and only a fool would leave a Baratheon king or queen alive.”

“Would you have told her to kill them?”

Tyrion thought. “No. I might have lost my head for it, but no, I wouldn’t have told Daenerys to kill Tommen or Myrcella.” He left Joffrey off his list deliberately. No one mourned that cunt’s death but his parents and even Jaime wasn’t protesting Tyrion slight.

“What of the child? The baby in Cersei’s belly.”

“You already heard the queen, she’ll let it live.”

“Will she?” Jaime turned to Tyrion. “She has baby-killers who are loyal to her. I believe she’ll do it in a way that can never be proven to be her, just as our father did with Elia, Rhaenys and Aegon, but I don’t think my child will ever be safe while she sits on the throne.”

There it was. The reason Tyrion wasn’t sleeping well. The army of the dead worried him, but Jon Snow (or the other Aegon Targaryen) and Jaime were more suited for battle strategies. It was the demon monkey who was expected to plot the deaths of children. Tyrion thought of the Dragon Queen’s pregnancy. She might be a mother soon. “I would tell her to kill Cersei and take the babe in as a Ward. Then she can control the child well enough.”

Jaime didn’t seem convinced, but he let the matter drop. “What do you think father would have done if he were here? How would he battled dragons?”

Tyrion looked up, expecting to see Drogon, but the beast still couldn’t fly, so he was paddling beside the boats, his brother always nearby. Tyrion wondered if it was easier for dragons, family. The Targaryen family sure didn’t make family look easy, but their flying monsters only seemed to
dance on their riders commands.

“I think father would have fought much like Loren Lannister. He would have given a good fight, but ultimately bent the knee to save his neck.”

“Much like I did,” Jaime said. “And you.”

“Father was the reason I had to have my neck saved in the first place. He knew I wasn’t responsible for Joffrey’s death and he let Cersei blame me anyway. Glad to be rid of me.”

It was an argument they’d already had, and neither man had the energy to repeat it now. Instead Jaime said, “I hope we make it out of this alive, Tyrion. I hope our line doesn’t end with us.”

Tyrion looked up to his big brother and said, “Me too.”

Jaime walked away and Tyrion watched his brother’s dirty, tattered cloak sway behind him. So different from the flawless white he was used to seeing on his brother’s shoulders.

Lost in his thoughts, Tyrion wasn’t sure how long he’d stood there before decided to retire to his room. While making his way to his door, he saw Jon Snow come out of the queen’s room. The man was clearly not expecting Tyrion to be out in the hall, but unlike before, he offered no excuse or lie.

Still, Tyrion needled him. “Tucking our queen in, how noble of you Lord Snow.”

Jon nodded but didn’t reply. Tyrion looked at the younger man’s crotch, which was just barely lower than his eye level. “You may want to tuck yourself back in as well.”

Jon immediately reacted, his hands flying to his laces to cover his modesty. Only to find that he was already laced up and covered. He then glared at the Queen’s Hand.

Tyrion smirked. In times like this, one took what little amusements they could get.

Theon struggled to remember Yara as a child, wished he had more fond things to think on her than when she tried to save him. But there was nothing there, only memories of riding in the woods with Robb, mastering the bow with Ser Rodrik and tormenting Jon. Winterfell had been his home. It had been the place of all of his best memories.

As well as his worst. Theon’s body collapsed into himself as he remembered: Bolton, his damned dogs, his sausages, his cruel smile. Theon shuttered as he became Reek once more, a helpless thing.

He forced the feelings down and thought of his sister. She had saved him from that, he might not have let her drag him from Winterfell, but she had forced him to remember himself and their heritage on their boats. She had saved him, now it was his turn to save her.

“You need to see this,” one of the ironborn entered his room without knocking. The man had a twisted scar across his eye, yet looked spooked by whatever he saw. It made Theon concerned to see. He raced up the stairs to see what was wrong.

It took little to see what was wrong. A darkness had spread over Westeros, unnatural and unholy.
Theon’s blood chilled at the sight of it. He remembered what Jon had been saying, of an army of dead men invading the Seven Realms. What had been happening here?

Theon wanted to give the order to fell to the Iron Islands. The dead couldn’t swim, he could wait it out now that he knew Euron hadn’t done that as he said he would. But then Yara would certainly die if she wasn’t dead already. And Euron wouldn’t stay away forever, no matter what happened with the dead.

No, Theon took a deep, shaky breath. He had to fight now, not later. “Make sail for White Harbor.”

They had been going to King’s Landing, to follow his uncle, but Theon realized that his northern family might need him more right now.

Daario walked up beside him, giving a low whistle. “What kind of fight are you leading us to?”

White Harbor was different this time around. Perhaps it was because Daenerys had tasted the bitterness of defeat or the joy of knowing she was growing Jon’s, her soon-to-be-husband’s, child. She wasn’t sure why it felt different, but the city seemed to have changed in the months since she’d last stepped foot on its shores.

She knew it was more likely that she had been the one that had changed, but she felt the same, if fuller. Her hand went to her stomach. A child. A growing child that the maester had confirmed seemed healthy. She tried not to hope, as she knew the price she might pay for such carelessness, but her heart leapt ahead of her, regardless of what her mind warned.

Daenerys pictured a sweet girl, with her father’s eyes and curls, but Daenerys silver-blond hair. She knew she’d spoil the girl, but she would be firm compared to Jon’s doting. She smiled at their imagined future. She knew it might never be, but she wanted it to happen, so badly.

She forced herself back to the present. The child was not here, and though the marriage would take place in a week, that was not her concern at the moment either.

Daenerys was on her steed, addressing the khalsear that had crossed the sea for her. Her bloodriders had not all seen what had happened at Winterfell, but they’d heard. By now, that tribes were reunited, she was certain many stories had been told. No one looked happy. She knew the horselords were a suspicious bunch. This was never going to be an easy fight for them.

Still, Daenerys held herself high in her saddle, trying to look every inch the Khaleesi she was. She knew this moment may spell her doom. Jorah and others had tried to talk her out of it, but with her injured Drogon still recovering behind her, she knew this was the only right thing she could do. She yelled at her men in Dothraki, “Qoy ki tih qoy.”

Every man, woman and child looked at her. Daenerys knew that behind her, in the walled city of White Harbor there were people watching her too. This would be one of those moments turned to legend long after she was gone.

Assuming there were still people left to tell such legends. But Daenerys would not allow such a thing to happen. No, her child would inherit the world, a better world that Daenerys would create for her or him. She continued, switching to the common tongue as she’d already placed translators throughout the Dothraki, “I have brought you across the Narrow Sea to conquer Westeros and gain
back the throne stolen from me, but the Great Stallion had a higher purpose for us here. He united
the khalasar to defeat the living dead men and save the world from darkness.”

Daenerys saw how the Dothraki shifted, saw their nerves as they looked up to where the sun
should be. They were brave, but they also understood the power of evil, ancient magic. She took a
deep breath, knowing what she must do, knowing she might lose her army at such an action. She
took out a blade and cut off her braids.

Those from Westeros didn’t understand, but her Dothraki and the Unsullied do. There is much
mumbling, and Daenerys switches back to Dothraki, knowing their opinions will be the most
important. “I have lost my first battle with these living dead, but I shall win the war. They are
creatures of ice and I bring them fire. Fire and blood - the words of my people. If you wish to break
from my khalasar and return to your Great Grass Sea, you may do so.” She pointed to the harbor.
“There are ships that will take you, but those that chose to stay will help me defeat the greatest
enemy ever seen. They will win glory beyond measure.”

She stopped. She couldn’t tell if she’d convinced them or not, but she added one more thing, “But
if you flee, I ask you this: do you think the Night King won’t come east? Won’t find you in Essos?
You’ve seen the dragon. You think you can protect yourself against his hordes in the Great Grass
Sea?”

She gets no answer.

“Any man or woman who wishes leave may do so. Decide quickly, for once my wedding takes
place, I will be burning the boats behind those who run.”

Daenerys doesn’t know how many will stay and how many will leave, but she watches as her most
loyal followers step forward and cut off their braids. They then stand beside her. “Jin haj tat vo
lanat. Kisha has ma yer.”

The rest of her khalasar follows, a pile of braids falling at her feet. Daenerys doesn’t know who
will stay and who will go, but the Dothraki guard at her side gives her some hope they won’t all
splinter off again.

She looked to her new Unsullied captain, Freed as well as Missandei, “I offer the same to you and
anyone else who crossed from Essos with me. You may leave this fight and go to warmer lands.”

Freed replied without hesitation, “You are Mysa. I will not abandon you. Nor my brothers. Not
now, not ever.”

Missandei added, “Where we go, your grace? We are safest with you. You are the only one who
can stop this evil. We trust you, Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen. We know you will
protect us.”

Missandei’s eyes were still puffy from her recent tears over the loss of her beloved. Daenerys knew
it would be a long time before her friend’s tears dried completely for the loss of Grey Worm, if
they ever did, but still, she stood by the woman who’d been responsible for his death. As she was
queen, and responsible for every man she sent to war on her behalf, even against an enemy that
threatened them all. Daenerys tried to hide the tears that gathered, not wanting the Dothraki to see
her as weak. “I don’t deserve you, any of you.”

“You deserve us, your grace. That’s why we stay.” Missandei took and gripped her queen’s hand.
Daenerys gripped back.
Arya stuck to Jon’s side, but he was no longer the brother she had once known. He was a king, or soon to be one again once his wedding took place. His day was filled with planning and war strategy and he spent his nights with the queen. He tried to carve out time to spend with Arya and Bran, but Arya could tell his mind was elsewhere even when he did. Jon loved her, loved his family, but his duty was more important to him now.

It made Arya restless to stay with the army. She still had one name on her list. She didn’t want to leave her brother’s side again, but staying with Jon would not bring her to Cersei any time soon. He would remain north until his war with the dead was won. Arya didn’t know how long that would take, and as loathe as she was to part with her family, she knew she would never have a better chance to escape and go south.

Boats were leaving every day. Some carried the queen’s followers back to their homelands. Some carried northerners south, as they weren’t fighters and had no choice but to flee from the death coming for them. It would be easy enough for her to leave without detection. She wouldn’t even need a new face.

Arya wrestled with the choice. She would never forgive herself if something happened to Jon and she wasn’t here with him. But Jon was as protected as he could be, with dragons watching over him now. The queen and her children wouldn’t let Jon get hurt and Arya could stop the second front of this war before it started by killing Cersei now.

Mind made up, she left Needle behind for Jon as well as a note telling him to look after it for her, as she’d be back for it soon. He was with the queen, but she knew he’d return to his chambers in the morning, as was his habit. Part of her wanted to hug him one more time before leaving, but she knew if she tried to say good-bye in person, her favorite brother would convince her to stay and she would probably never be able to leave.

She found Bran under the weirwood tree, and unsurprisingly he already knew her plans. He wished her luck and she hugged him. Unlike the last time, he returned her hug. Arya thought about finding Gentry, but she worried he’d insist on coming with. So she just went to where she’d hidden her procured boat and readied to leave.

A growl of a voice stopped her, “Where do you think you’re going?”

Arya dropped the boat she’d been dragging and turned to see the Hound watching her. Refusing to be intimidated or fearful of him, she pulled herself to her full height. “I’m going to kill Queen Cersei.”

The Hound snorted, “And how ya planning to do that? You going to sneak into the Red Keep as a servant girl or something?”

Arya thought of the faces she stored in her bag. She should have taken Jaime Lannister’s face, she realized. But she’d been too impatient and following him around Winterfell had just made her sad for him. Besides, she’d learned that it was likely that Cersei might not welcome her brother back. “Never you mind.”

The Hound spit on the sand. “I’ll come with. I have unfinished business with my brother anyway.”

Arya wanted to protest, but the idea had merit. The Hound had spent much more time in King’s
Landing than she had, probably knew all the secret ways into the Red Keep. Still, she pulled out her Valyrian blade, putting it to his throat before he could do anything to stop her. “Fine, but you’ll heed my orders. Understood?”

Her quickness clearly surprised him. He grunted in a way that made Arya assume his assent. He touched his throat as soon as she took away the blade. “What in the seven hells did they teach over in Essos?”

Arya smirked as they grabbed onto the boat, pushing out into the harbor. “How to be a girl with no name.”

Cersei had ordered the Gold Cloaks to put down the riots that kept happening around the city. But incompetent fools they were, their commander was currently explaining to her why she had to stay indoors as they couldn’t protect the city from itself. Cersei nearly snarled at the man before her, “I should have guessed my brother would have put an incompetent fool in charge. I should have removed you when he was arrested, but I thought you might improve with a better ruler in charge.”

Jacelyn Bywater, commander of the City Watch, looked to his feet. “I’m sorry, your grace.”

Cersei thought of punishing him, throwing him into the overstuffed dungeons, but then who would she put in his place? Most of the noble families fled the city when the sun was put out, cowards they were. She finished her wine and dismissed the commander, sick of hearing excuses.

She looked out over the city. “Lion’s do not care for the opinions of sheep.” That was what her father had always said to her and her brothers. She didn’t care what the people of King’s Landing thought of her. She was queen by right. Let the people sing their songs of the heroics of the King in the North and the Dragon Queen. They would die soon enough. Let the people curse her and call her cruel. They did not understand the burden of ruling or the tough choices that had to be made now winter was here. Some of them would have to die. It didn’t matter if it was starvation or war or riots, without the food from the Reach, the population of King’s Landing would have to decrease one way or another.

Cersei put out her cup for a refill and one of her maids clamored to refill it. She was a stupid girl from some House in the Reach. Cersei didn’t remember her name if she’d ever even bothered to learn it. The girl’s father had fought in the Battle of the Goldroad though he hadn’t died. The coward had knelt to Daenerys Targaryen, but Cersei kept the daughter anyway. The girl was terrified of her, just as cowardly as her father had been. Cersei despised the girl, but with so many nobles away, she had few ladies to choose from. At times like this, she missed Sansa Stark or even Margaery Tyrell, at least they were clever and brave.

With her newly filled cup, Cersei enjoyed the sweet liquid. She asked, “What do you think of this eternal darkness?”

The girl bowed her head, “The Septans say it is caused by a dark and evil magic. And it will only be defeated through the Light of the Seven.”

Cersei remembered her walk of atonement, feeling the awfulness of the memory before she remembered how she’d gotten her revenge on her enemies. “I do not care for the Faith of the Seven,” she said, drinking more.
A knock came from the door and Cersei ordered, “Enter.”

Her Hand walked in and bowed. “Your Grace, ships were spotted. Euron Greyjoy has arrived with his fleet and the Golden Company.”

Cersei smiled, finally her plans could begin. Qyburn had told her of his progress. She would have an unstoppable army to defeat her enemies once and for all. “Prepare my horse and order a guard. I will ride out to meet him.”

Qyburn hesitated before he said, “Are you sure that’s wise? The city is dangerous right now.”

Cersei would not be deterred. “So double the guard. Knights with swords will always beat peasants with butter knives.”

Her will was carried out quickly, and it wasn’t long before she was on a horse on the way to the River Gate. As she rode through the streets, jeering crowds began to gather around her. Cersei ignored their angry words. Lions did not care for the opinions of sheep.

A few threw mud towards her, but nothing hit and the guard put an end to such activity soon enough. Still, the journey took longer than Cersei would have liked, but they made it to the gate to greet her new army.

Now that they were stationary, the crowd (or mob) began to grow more. The yelling and screaming for food, cursing her as a whore, and proclaiming the gods had abandoned them grew as well. Cersei didn’t react, but she saw the ladies with her were all afraid. Cersei refrained from sneering at them, her eyes trained on the sea that would deliver her army.

Then she felt a rock hit the back of her head, she turned around, noticing that her guard was struggling to keep the mob back. “Draw your swords, fools,” Cersei ordered. She pulled her hand from where the rock had hit to look at it. No blood. “Stop this!”

The guards did their best, but only Ser Robert Strong held back the crowd. The other queensguard and City Watch members struggled against the mob. The City Watch Commander was cut off from the rest of them, falling into the waters of the Blackwater. A few of his men followed him into the waters.

The mob pushed in, but Cersei didn’t fear, as Robert Strong stayed between her and them. Still she could feel herself being pushed back, and her eyes darted. She had nowhere to run out here, nowhere but the water.

Her ladies were crying now, clinging to each other. Cersei shouldn’t have brought them with. Weak idiots. Her head stayed up, her glare towards the crowd not breaking even as a few of the dirtied masses broke through the guard, only to meet Ser Strong’s sword.

When five came at her massive queensguard, one broke away running past him. He yelled, holding a dagger above his head, coming straight for the queen. Cersei didn’t flinch even as her ladies ran from her, before being stopped by the guards around them. They were desperate and frightened, but Cersei had seen the boats.

Before the man was able to touch his queen a bolt was through his neck. Cersei smiled and turned to see Euron Greyjoy on deck of his ship, men crowded behind him, ready to fight. One reloaded his crossbow, ready to kill any other man or woman that might break through.

The gangplank was drawn and Euron Greyjoy stepped off. He ordered his men to help the guard and send the mob packing. He stopped in front of his queen, taking her hand and bending to kiss it.
“Did you miss me, your grace?”

She smiled in reply, taking her hand back. A foreign men followed Euron Greyjoy, scowling at the mob and looking at the Ironborn King with suspicion. Euron ignored the look, smiling as he introduced the man, “Let me present Harry Strickland, Commander of the Golden Company.”

He nodded to Cersei. She turned away to watch the mob be put down. Cersei smiled at the sight of the mob running from her new army, with Euron Greyjoy and its commander at her back. Mice fleeing at the sight of an angered lion, she thought.

The weakened dragon and wolf would be next.

A man made his way through the bowels of the Red Keep, having stole away on the Gold Company’s ship. He heard the cries of those imprisoned and tortured, but ignored them all. He was here for one man.

There were horrors hidden here that even chilled his blood to see, abominations of death that the many faced-god would not suffer. There very existence was an insult to death. They should be destroyed, thought the man. But he would not do it. That was not why he was here.

He found his target strapped to a table, bleeding and weak from starvation. The man released him, but knew there would be no saving him. The banker turned to him and said with his bloody mouth, “The queen has insulted the Iron Bank. Pay it back, with interest.”

A man nodded.

Chapter End Notes

(Loose) Valyrian Translation:
Winter roses smell like a kiss
They do not grow with water and sun
But through stone and where no man is
They bloom when others run

Winter roses live under strife
Beautiful and fragile steel
They grow where there is no life
Hard land, soft feel

Dothraki Translation:
Qoy ki tih qoy - blood of my blood
Jin haj tat vo lanat. Kisha has ma yer. - The strong do not run. We are with you.
Chapter Notes

Obviously I’m a liar as this certainly didn’t get finished before the show started again. As a result this chapter was probably fluffier than it might have otherwise been, as I need to prepare myself for the canon angst that seems to be ahead of us (and celebrate that one happy moment we got). I’m still going to try to finish this story as an au, as I already have it mapped out, but now canon may find itself creeping in and definitely influencing, especially on plotlines I’m not sure how to tie up. (So, I guess, potential season 8 spoilers though they may need to be reworked to fit my narrative anyway.)

And God help my Jonerys writing muse if either actually do die in canon before the end. Even though I really don’t see that happening. (Cue I am Boo Boo the Fool meme)

Varys looked around his old friend’s estate. Illyrio sat lounging on the balcony and Varys struggled to remember the strapping warrior he’d befriended when they’d both been young. He could only see him in Illyrio’s still sharp and calculating eyes. “So she made it back to Westeros with her army?”

Varys nodded. “I suppose you want your payment for your previous generosity.”

Illyrio shook his head. “She’s not on the throne yet. And if what you’re saying about this army of the dead is true, she might never get there.”

Varys’ head went to the side. “If you believe that then why did you ever help the Targaryens?”

Illyrio popped a grape in his mouth. “I learned a long time ago to hedge my bets. If you bet on both sides, you’ll always win.” He smiled and Varys had to stop himself from rolling his eyes.

He sat down across from the former sellsword. “She’s not married is she? I’d like to be a king, I think, and I gave her the best wedding present anyone’s ever received. I got the brother to agree to make me Master of Coin, but maybe I can do better with the queen.”

Varys smiled. “Not that I’ve heard, but I wouldn’t get my hopes up. She has caught the eye of a northern king.” He declined to mention that the two were in love and likely to marry. Illyrio didn’t need to know that and Varys knew the true value of information, even for a friend, perhaps especially for a friend.

The magister snorted, “Figures. And to think, I once called Daenerys Targaryen a weak, malleable girl-child. I brokered her marriage to Khal Drogo because I didn’t want such a meek wife for
myself.”

“No one ever accused you of being a soothsayer.”

Illyrio laughed at that. “I don’t know about that. Perhaps the Westerosi really are sewing dragon banners now and drinking toasts to her health and rule.”

Varys didn’t comment one way or another, a habit he knew annoyed Illyrio, but one the former sellsword had grown used to back when they were young men. Illyrio shifted and his eyes narrowed. “I know you’re not here for a social visit, old friend. What is it that you want from me?”

Varys smiled. Illyrio never let him down. He would play the game of niceties as any good magister, but he was still a straightforward soldier at heart. “If you want to be Master of Coin, I suggest you start by negotiating for stores of grain and other foodstuffs here in Essos.”

Illyrio seemed confused. “Westeros doesn’t have food?”

“It’s winter.” Varys plucked a grape and ate it, never one to let a dramatic pause pass. “And with no sun, Westeros will need Essos’ assistance.”

Illyrio’s eyebrows rose. “What do you mean? I don’t understand your metaphor. Is it a Westrosi phrase?”

“No metaphor. Some ancient magic has blotted out the sun in Westeros.” Varys looked to the brightly shining sun in Essos. He had little desire to return to a land of war and death, but he knew he must. He imagined for a moment remaining in Essos, joining Illyrio and living a life of leisure and pleasure.

But he’d found little pleasure in life, and he would grow too bored to quickly with idleness. Better his talents be used in bettering the world, reshaping it to his vision then little it all fall to waste.

“You should stay here then, let Westeros die.” Illyrio held his cup up and servant (or slave) filled it silently.

“The queen has dragons. She may come back to Essos, where she also has a kingdom. What do you think she will do to us who abandoned her?”

Illyrio didn’t meet Varys’ eyes, he looked into the garden instead. He took a deep drink, finishing his full glass, and then stood. “Walk with me,” he said.

Varys’ eyes narrowed. What was Illyrio playing at? Still, he followed him into the gardens. They walked through twisted paths of greenery, and Varys wasn’t sure what Illyrio was hiding, but grew more certain with each step that he wouldn’t like it.

Then Illyrio stopped and Varys was faced with someone he’d hoped to never see again. Illyrio cleared his throat and said, “I’ll leave you to it.”

But Varys stopped him with a snarl, “You dare bring this...this thing here?”

Illyrio smiled, his eyes crinkling at their ends, “You spent too much time in Westeros, old friend. You’ve forgotten the power Red Priestesses have here in Essos. I won’t anger their god, nor the people who believe in him. There’s too many believers in these lands.”

With that, Melisandre stepped forward. “It’s time for us to return, Lord Varys. Our king and queen need us.”
Varys’ eyes stayed narrowed and his lip curled. The Red Woman seemed to ignore his distaste for her, she walked to the pond Illyrio had installed years ago. Looking down and watching the fish darting around. Varys kept his distance, scowling at his friend who was walking away.

Melisandre’s fingertips skimmed the water without touching it. “It can be hard to read the messages in the flames. I’ve read them wrong before, but my fate lies in Westeros. I must fight the Night King. Fire and life must win.”

Varys’ arms clenched each other beneath his long sleeves. “I don’t see how fire is connected to life.”

The Red Woman smiled at him, removing her hand from the pond. “The sun is the source of much life in this world. Fires burn to keep men warm and children fed. It can be cruel, but it cleanses the world, helps it be reborn.” She stood, her eyes looking off into a distance Varys would never see. “The Lord of the Light has shown me the way. I must return with you. I shall help the living win.”

“Historically, ice beats fire. It burns out too quickly to really cause any real destruction.”

“Not if the fire burns hot enough.”

Varys thought of the dragons, thought of their sheer destructive power. “Flames that hot may destroy the world as easily as ice ever could.”

“Then the world would be born anew, just as you wish to see.”

Varys didn’t know how she would know such a thing. He didn’t share his dream with many, a dream of a new and better world. He’d spent his life plotting and scheming to see it done. He felt he was so close. He had a good Targaryen who was willing and able to rebuild the world. He just need a few more adjustments and she would be the savior he wanted her to be.

She would be the perfect prince he lost when he let Rhaegar Targaryen fall.

After making him promise never to leave her, she left him instead. Jon was torn between his anger and his sadness. How could she? How could Arya leave like this? What if something happened to her? He’d already lost Sansa, already failed his father in protecting his eldest daughter; he could not bear to fail again.

Jon knew Arya could take care of herself, but what if she couldn’t? What if she got in over her head and he wasn’t there to protect her? He could not lose any more family.

He held Needle in his hands, looking over the blade that had always been small, but seemed even tinier in his hand now then when he’d asked the blacksmith to forge it for his beloved sister. He looked at the sword. It had been well cared for over the years, but there were unmistakable signs of use. Nicks on the blade and some dried blood on the hilt that hadn’t quite been cleaned away.

Jon felt the sorrow for all his sister had gone through as he’d been on the wall. All he couldn’t protect her from. He had only heard stories of the Red Wedding, but Arya had seen it for herself. Had seen Robb’s body and Grey Wind’s head stitched together. He felt the tears at his eyes at the rage of such a sight. How dare they. Those fucking traitors. He wished he could kill Ramsey all over again. He remembered pounding that little shit into the ground, the warmth of the blood on his
hands, how if Sansa hadn’t appeared he would have kept going until that fucker’s head was nothing but a pulpy mess.

He had deserved it. Jon felt no pity or remorse for that act. He regretted so much in his life, but not that. Ramsay Snow had deserved worse than he’d gotten.

A knock on the door interrupted Jon’s dark thoughts. He gave himself a minute to recompose himself before opening it. On the other side wasn’t Davos or Daenerys as he expected, but Lord Manderly. The Lord of White Harbor smiled, “May I come in?”

Jon opened the door wider and stepped aside to give Manderly room to enter. Lord Manderly asked, “Is your room comfortable, my lord?”

“Yes,” Jon confirmed. Then he added, “Thank you for your hospitality.”

Lord Manderly walked around the room, looking at the furnishings. “Good. I am honored for my humble city to be chosen for your royal wedding, your majesty.”

Jon’s eyes closed. He knew this was coming. He knew it, but he hadn’t wanted to deal with it. “Yes,” he said, hoping the man would drop it.

Of course he didn’t, turning to glare at Jon. “So you didn’t have time to marry my granddaughters, but you can make the time to marry the dragon queen.”

“She's pregnant,” Jon justified, before he realized he hadn’t meant to reveal that, but at the lord’s raised eyebrow, Jon decided to use his slip-up. He lowered his voice and confided, like he would to a father, “I won’t father a bastard. I must make time.”

His words had the desired effect, as Manderly seemed touched by the trust, if still a bit annoyed. “She didn’t get pregnant spontaneously. You fucked her in my castle, didn’t you? You broke bread with me, told me you would consider one of my granddaughters for a wife and lied to my face, knowing you’d marry her not one of them.”

“I didn’t fuck her in your castle,” Jon lied. “I fucked her in the boat on the way to your castle.”

Manderly chuckled, he sat on the bed next to Jon, causing it to spring up a bit due to the added weight. “You never intended to marry either of them, did you?”

Jon sighed. “I really would have considered it. They seem like nice girls and it would have made sense politically, but Daenerys is an even better match. You know as well as I that it will unite the Seven Kingdoms. The North keeps its king and the rightful queen is restored.”

“Your brother…”

“My brother was a better man than me. I know that. He probably would have handled everything better than I did. I am sorry for that. I’m sorry he couldn’t have remained King in the North. He was better at it. But he died. He died and we’re all suffering for it.”

“You’re not a bad man, Jon Snow. Not even a bad king. And if I’m being honest, you have better taste in women than your brother. Beautiful woman like that who faces down a dragon. Fuck, who wouldn’t fall in love with her?” His jeweled hand ran through his white hair. “And if what my son says is true than perhaps you were destined to lead us in this fight. Perhaps you had to fall in love with the Dragon Queen.”

Jon shifted to the business of war. “How are your defenses? Are the scorpions mounted on the
walls? How many men do you have stationed?"

“Even with greenhouses, it’s hard to grow anything without the sun.”

Jon knew that. They had to beat the Army of the Dead soon. Even with Sansa’s blow against the enemy, their army could afford to wait them out, let them die slowly and starve. Jon knew they had to win, decisively, the sooner the better.

But they were fighting men and women of the north -- people who knew the hard choices that must be made in Winter. He remembered the dark tales of the Septa, of mothers smothering their babes so there was one less mouth to feed, of old men who walked naked in the snow to die, of the truly desperate eating human flesh when all the animals were gone. He hoped it wouldn’t come to that, but he knew his people were built to survive the Long Winter. They were blood of the First Men after all.

Though Manderly wasn’t. He was more southern than northern in many ways. But Jon supposed that didn’t matter now. They were living; they were allies. “What about your trading partners? Would they bring food?” Jon wasn’t sure where they might get the money, but he guessed that Daenerys had gold.

“The south is hoarding their food stores with Winter here, and Essos doesn’t come here anymore, not with the sky as it is. Sailors are a superstitious bunch. They don’t take well to ill omens.”

Jon nodded. Logistics won wars. That had always been true. But what happened when one side didn’t have any to speak of? Hungry men never fought as well as well-fed ones, but the Night King’s army didn’t need food. Didn’t need rest. Jon was already tired. He would need to sleep for a month at least to feel well-rested again. He couldn’t share any of these worries with Lord Manderly though. So he dismissed him instead.

Jon walked to the fire, looking into the flames, searching for answers he knew he wouldn’t find. He would have a family soon, a wife and child to look after. It had always been his heart’s most wanted desire. Now it was here and as happy as it made him, it terrified him as well. What would he do if Daenerys fell? How would he be able to go on and keep fighting without her? He tried to remember his life before her, but he could never go back to that. He could never abide by such loneliness again, not that he’d had a taste of true happiness.

Jon knew with a terrifying certainty, if Daenerys fell with their child inside her, he would follow her to the grave as soon as he was able.

Ser Davos found himself a busy man. Somehow he’d wound up with the job of organizing a royal wedding. How he was qualified to do such a thing, he wasn’t sure, but the bride and groom were busy with war plans and Tyrion had somehow wormed his way out of helping. Davos cursed the dwarf and his cleverness, even if he wasn’t sure how Tyrion had managed it.

The first thing Davos had to learn was all of the fucking cultures the queen and king represented, as he only knew the basics of northern weddings and even less about wildling ones. He himself had been married in the Light of the Seven, which he also knew would have to be included in this ceremony since the people of Westeros would want their king and queen’s marriage to be valid in the eyes of their gods. But he also had to please the Dothraki and the rest of the queen’s people.
It was a daunting thing, and the more he learned the more confused and daunting the task became. The Dothraki celebrated everything with death, apparently. Wildlings didn’t really have weddings, you stole your bride or man and that was that. So far, the one thing Davos had settled for sure is that the ceremony would take place in front of the weirtree. That would please the northerners and upset no one else.

Davos was also expected to plan a celebration fit for a royal couple without breaking the strict rationing they were all under. The whole mess was beginning to make him long for the simpler days when Jon needed him to rally banners that were reluctant to support a bastard king or when Stannis asked him to find money that didn’t exist. One would think that impossible tasks would get easier the more you did them, but no, they just stayed impossible.

At least the couple was already in love, Davos thought. No matter what else, they would look beautiful, stunning and regal. He knew that would do half the work for anyone watching to see if this was truly a deserving royal couple that legends and songs would be told about. They were young, but they looked the part of godlike figures. And now that they had dropped the facade of neutrality completely, no one would be able to deny their love. There would be no crying bride or determined looks of duty at this ceremony.

He’d already spoken with the queen to get what she wanted in the ceremony, now he had to find Jon. He already knew the former King in the North would have little to say about his wedding, leaving it mostly up to Davos, but still Davos wanted to make sure the future king had a chance to say his piece.

And honestly, he missed talking to the young man. He liked Jon. He was overwhelmingly busy nowadays, but Davos knew it was important to take a break even during times like these. Sometimes he felt more like a mother hen than a (former) hand with Jon, making sure the man ate and slept rather than giving him too much advice.

He found Jon after talking with some soldiers, as the commander was overseeing the training on the newly installed scorpions. Apparently Jon was deciding if every soldier needed training on the weapons or if there should be a dedicated unit for them.

Davos flinched at the sound of a bolt being loosed. The shouting of men didn’t bother him, and he watched as Jon sternly ordered another bolt be prepared as quickly as possible. The commander didn’t seem pleased by the amount of time it took.

For a moment, Davos just stood next to his king. He knew Jon would turn his attention to him when he could. So he waited. Another bolt was shot, but Davos didn’t flinch this time. Jon continued to watch, but now asked, “What is it, Davos?”

Davos repressed a grin. The man was predictable, just like Stannis had been, except for his actions with his daughter, of course. “I was wondering if you recalled that you were getting married in a few days,”

Jon sighed. “Aye.”

“While it’s a king’s prerogative to leave the details of such things to lesser beings, most of them do have some opinions of how they expect their weddings to go. Do you have any thoughts on your wedding, your grace?”

“No bedding.” Jon said immediately. “I don’t want a bunch of drunk men groping my wife. She’s pregnant already, no need to confirm the consummation.” Jon paused before adding. “And I’m no longer a king, Davos.” He blinked before turning to look at Davos. Then he added, “You can leave,
you know. Go home and be with your family. I’m not a king anymore, I no longer need a Hand.”

“Oh, and what does marrying a queen make you?”

“Lucky,” Jon smiled at the question, a smile of a lovesick fool, Davos thought. He nearly rolled his eyes. Youth. It was wasted on the young.

“My wife and children are safest where they are. I will join them after you and the queen are on that damned throne and the realm is safe and at peace.”

“If you wait for Westeros to be safe and at peace, you’ll never see your family again.”

Davos smiled, it was rare for Jon to make a joke. He was almost as serious as Stannis had been. “I don’t suppose you care anything about the ceremony.”

“I follow the old gods,” Jon shrugged. “As long as they are honored and I marry Dany, I don’t much care about the rest of it. Like you said, the details are your problem, not mine.” He said it with a smirk that made Davos understand it was a joke.

It was nice to see this serious young man so happy. Davos had never seen Jon this light-hearted. It was almost strange to see after he’d lost his home, but then, in a way he’d gained another. He was in love, still in the honeymoon period. There was a baby on the way, but it was still an idea not a reality. Jon didn’t know about the sleepless nights because the babe refuses to sleep. Or the even more sleepless nights when the baby doesn’t cry at all because it’s too sick for that and all you can see is the dead child, you as a father failed to protect. Jon didn’t know any of that, but he would soon.

Davos wanted to leave the man to his happiness, reality would break it soon enough, but he had one more question. “What of your name?”

Jon looked confused. “What do you mean?”

“You’re getting married. Jon Snow may be your name in every way that matters, but it’s not your true name. You are Aegon Targaryen, sixth of his name.”

Jon said nothing, but Davos pressed him. “It’s your true name. You should use it here.”

“That doesn’t matter. It will just cause more questions.”

“It will, but a man uses his name when he takes a wife. King or not.”

“The queen…”

“The queen has already put your true name in her will. I don’t think she’ll mind marrying you with it. You’re the one who keeps saying titles don’t matter.”

“They don’t matter now, not while the dead are here, but after…” Jon sighed and broke off. “I don’t want to cause any problems for her rule.”

“You’ll be her king. Even if anyone wants to support your claim over hers, the only change it would bring is that she would be your queen. It won’t matter except to silence anyone who might still think that a northern bastard doesn’t deserve a crown.”

“I don’t want to wear a crown.”

“The crowns have already been made, you’re both wearing them. Get over that.” Davos snapped.
Those damn crowns had been hard to make fast as most jewelers insisted they would need months not a week. But the queen had pressed for them and Davos had agreed with her arguments. “The queen designed yours specially. Symbols are important and the people need to see you as the rightful rulers.” He paused before using his most powerful argument. “It’s for your child. So that no one can later claim that he or she isn’t a crowned prince or princess.”

Davos saw the fight leave Jon. Davos understood that too, better than Jon would until he held his son or daughter in his arms. A father would do anything for his child. Throw away his honor, his life, or anything else the child might need. Nothing else mattered but the baby and their needs.

“Fine,” Jon said before he returned to work. Satisfied, Davos left him to it.

Tyrion never enjoyed watching feats of strength. Even watching Jaime win tournaments had always been more tedious than entertaining to him. He understood it might have been simple jealousy that fueled his distaste, as he would certainly never win a melee. Only the betting and drinking ever made it fun for him, and even then, he grew bored during the actual fighting.

But he had to stand beside his queen today. The Dothraki wanted to test her khal for themselves, make sure he was worthy of her. It was supposed to just be a simple demonstration, but word spread like wildfire, and it turned into a fucking royal tournament.

Tyrion supposed it was only natural. When the world was ending, everyone wanted one last scrap of joy, one last fuck, one last fight, one last party. He completely understood not wanting to die sober. Still, it had been a pain to arrange as the crowd grew until practically everyone in White Harbor, minus the Unsullied guards came to watch.

His money was on Jon Snow. Jorah had told him about his contest with a Dothraki warrior, and if that old bear could beat one, surely the young wolf would be fine. Still, part of him couldn’t help but worry, what if the Dothraki killed Jon Snow? What happened then? Who would lead the war? Who would the queen marry so her child wasn’t fatherless? He’d already tried to talk people out of it, but warriors were stupid when their fighting pride was on the line.

The dead would kill them all soon enough, but apparently no one wanted to wait that long. Tyrion took a drink of the watered down piss they were calling wine in these tough times. He thought about finding something from the Dothraki. It tasted foul, but at least it got a man drunk.

“So what is exactly is this? It’s not a wedding tournament, yet it is. Is this one of those foreign things your queen seems so fond of?”

Tyrion tensed at the sound of his brother’s voice. “No one is ordered to be here. You are free to watch the skies for any undead dragons, if you want.”

“I’ve seen enough dragons. I think the possibility of watching a king die will be far more interesting.”

“You think Jon Snow will die? I don’t recall you ever worrying about King Robert.”

“No man was ever going to touch Robert, he was safer in a melee than in King’s Landing. The Dothraki aren’t loyal to King Jon,” Jaime said the name as mockingly as he once said Robert’s. “They might kill him if they can. Maybe the queen will just have to marry the winner.”
“That would go over well, the Queen of Westeros married to a Dothraki screamer. Maybe she should marry a damned wildling too, if Jon Snow dies. Keep them loyal to her.”

Jaime smirked. “She’ll end up with ten husbands if you follow that logic.”

“10 kings, I’m sure that would be great for the realm. It always goes well when the realm is run by a group of men rather than one. It’s why regents were always well-regarded.” Tyrion finished his water-wine.

“I missed your wit, little brother. I miss this easiness.”

Tyrion looked down and swallowed. “A lot has happened. None of it easy.”

On his other side, someone stepped up. Tyrion looked up to see it was one of the queen’s blood riders. Tyrion struggled to remember his name. Qhono, perhaps? He felt a little comforted by the fact that one of Daenerys’ bloodriders thought enough of him to protect him from a man who might be a threat or at least stand next to him.

The new presence clearly made Jaime uncomfortable. Tyrion almost sent the other man away, missing their brotherly comradery, but he still didn’t know much Dothraki. And he didn’t want to risk offending the bloodrider, so he decided that his brother would just have to stand it.

There was some fanfare as the queen arrived. Tyrion had wondered if she would fly in on her dragon again, but apparently she had decided it would be overkill. She merely walked to the chair that would serve as a throne, her company trailing her.

She looked to Jaime’s presence curiously, but she said nothing to Tyrion. She took her seat, with Missandei on one side and Lord Manderly on the other. The kind of tournament began.

They had rounded up some knights to begin the contests, as it was what the Westerosi would expect. A little lead in to the main event. The Dothraki hadn’t really understood the need, but wouldn’t protest more fighting and bloodshed. There would be tilts and a melee as a warm-up to the king fighting a Dothraki.

Jon had protested the extra fighting as well. “Northmen don’t care about southern tournaments and I don’t want this to take more time than it must.” He had been annoyed already that it had blown up into an event rather than a small fight. But he’d been overruled, as he was only the king and the groom concerning this wedding celebration.

Not that the queen and bride seemed thrilled with the change of events either, she liked fighting contests even less than Tyrion, but she decided to tolerate it, as it was what the people wanted. By the full crowd, Tyrion knew that Manderly hadn’t been lying when he’d argued for it, saying the people needed a distraction in these dark times. The planned celebration during a war wouldn’t be the spectacle most royal weddings were, but they still had to give the bards and singers something for the small folk to remember fondly.

The tilts and melees were nothing to remember, other than the fact that the Dothraki, despite not really understanding how lances worked, dominated. Though the Westerosi knights won the melee over some Dothraki fighters and Unsullied, keeping everyone happy.

Then it was time for the main event. Tyrion saw Davos giving Jon a pep talk, which the soon-to-king again seemed to indulge more than need. Tyrion wondered why the old smuggler took a such a shine to the broody northerner, but then the man had liked Stannis Baratheon despite losing his fingertips to the man. People were weird sometimes.
Jon Snow was wearing his typical northern armor and leathers. The crowd cheered when he walked out, which he didn't play to at all. Tyrion thought about how southern crowds wouldn't like that as well. They wanted the pageantry of tournaments as much the test of prowess and skill (along with the chance of some blood and death). Sometimes the north felt as foreign as Essos ever did.

Tyrion glanced to his brother, who knew more about tournaments than he ever would. He asked, “Why didn’t you enter the lists? You probably could have challenged the Dothraki.”

Jaime snorted. “And who would’ve cheered for me? Everyone up here would prefer to see me dead, even when compared to a foreign savage.” He swallowed some of his bitterness.

Tyrion said nothing in return. His brother was right, he had no friends in the north, especially as Tyrion wasn’t even sure he liked him.

Jon Snow took out his blade as the bloodrider took out his arakh. While the northerner simply prepared for a fight, the Dothraki did play to the crowd, twirling his blade and screaming out something Tyrion didn’t understand, but caused the horselords to cheer.

Tyrion noticed the northern faces in the crowd, who even when united in war didn’t care for these foreign savages and their strange ways. Not that Tyrion ever understood the Dothraki as the queen did. Still, he’d hoped the war would have bonded the people more. It didn’t bode well for when the dead were dealt with and it came to ruling a united realm.

The bloodrider attacked first. Jon blocked the arakh with his longsword. Both men dropped back to study and circle each other, looking for an opening. Tyrion could feel his breath stop and was surprised to find that the mass of people crowded in the area had fallen silent as well.

This time Jon attacked, thrusting his sword at the Dothraki’s blade arm and drawing first blood even as the bloodrider rolled away.

Tyrion waited for the cheer from the Westerosi, but they remained quiet. It unnerved him. He glanced at the queen, whose face gave away nothing as she watched the violence unfold.

Jon attacked again, but this time the Dothraki was too quick for him. The curved blade would have tasted blood but for Jon’s leathers. It continued like that, almost like a dance, the partners trading blows but neither gaining a real advantage. Jaime said, “He’s wearing him out.” Tyrion looked up and his brother explained. “Jon Snow. He’s tiring out the Dothraki. You can tell because he’s moving quicker while the horselord is beginning to slow.”

Oddly, Qhono answered, using his broken common tongue, “North cold. Must wear furs. Dothraki don’t do this. Gets in the way for fighting.”

Jaime nodded, and Tyrion at least understood as well. Jon Snow had an advantage in the north. He was used to fighting in many layers, the Dothraki weren’t. He wasn’t sure if the future king knew this and was using it to his advantage deliberately, or if he’d just figured it out. Either way the outcome was the same.

Jon Snow won. He knocked the arakh out of the bloodrider’s hand, swept a leg and forced the man to the ground, Longclaw at his throat. After a moment of silent tension, the Dothraki nodded and a cheer rose up. Jon Snow put away his sword and helped the Dothraki up.

He then turned to face his queen. Tyrion was surprised to see them both smiling at each other. It was rare for either of them to smile and he wasn’t sure if the sight pleased or scared him.

They were happy, but would it last? It never did.
Jon played with the silver hair that was spread across his scarred chest. He would never tire of these quiet moments. They never lasted long enough, but it helped him to cherish each on he got. Daenerys own fingers stretched about her head to play with his curls as well.

Along with its length Daenerys’ hair lost its curls. It was mostly straight now. He missed it though he would never say that to her. She was already upset about losing a battle, she didn’t need to hear his preferences on her hair as well.

Most of the Dothraki appeared to be staying in Westeros. Daenerys credited Jon’s fighting prowess, but he knew the credit really belonged to her. They’d followed her to Westeros, not him. If they stayed in Westeros, it was because they still followed her.

Daenerys interrupted his thoughts, “Are you ready to marry tomorrow?”

Jon felt the corners of his mouth lift. Then he remembered his family, with most of them gone, who would really be there that he cared about aside from his future wife? A few friends, and before he could stop himself, he answered her question with his honest thoughts. “I wish my family would be there, Arya left, Sansa’s gone…” Jon swallowed the grief he felt for his lost sister, not wanting the sadness to intrude. “Bran will be there, but…” He didn’t finish aloud, but he knew Daenerys understood, Bran was never really anywhere anymore.

“I know the feeling,” Daenerys said. Jon closed his eyes. Of course she did. As much family as he had lost, she had lost so much more. Before he could apologize, Daenerys said, “Did I ever tell you about my mother’s crown?”

“No,” he said.

He could feel her smile against his chest. “We had to sell it, but when we had it, I used to imagine what our mother was like. Viserys never even let me touch it, but I would picture wearing it when we took back our home and he was king again.” She stopped for a moment before continuing, “Viserys told me that our mother was beautiful and kind, but I never knew what she actually looked like until much later. I just pictured her as an older version of me. I had little to base what a mother was like, so I just had her act like I wished Viserys did. Telling me stories and letting me hug her sometimes. I don’t think I ever really knew anything about mothers until I became one.”

“I used to pretend my mother was just like Catelyn Stark. Only it was me she hugged and doted on instead of my brothers and sisters. In my imagination, my fake mother even looked a bit like her, red hair and all.” Jon shook his head at his own childish fantasies. “I remember her caring for me once. I was really sick and she looked after me, like I was one of her own. I thought maybe all my dreams had come true, but then I got better and she got worse. I thought it was all a fever dream until Robb told me how his mother cried over me. I never understood that.” Jon frowned. How different would have his life been if Ned had told his wife his true identity. Would have she treated him like that all the time?

It was foolish to think about such things now. If Catelyn hadn’t been proud and hateful, people would have noticed, would have questioned it, it might have killed him. Still, it would have been nice to have a mother’s love.

Daenerys hugged him. “We’re family too, Aegon Targaryen.”
Jon hated that name. He also didn’t really like to be reminded of that, especially while in bed with her. She must have sensed his discomfort, hugging him again. “My wolf,” Daenerys mumbled in Valyrian. Jon was proud of being able to identify a few words of her mother tongue.

He responded in her language, “My dragon.”

Daenerys laughed at his terrible accent but smiled at his effort all the same. The sight made his heart swell. He placed his hand over her belly, “And how is my other dragon?”

She smiled wider and put her hand over his. “I can feel him move sometimes though I doubt you will be able to feel it yet.”

Jon didn’t even think about that. He would be able to feel his child move with in her. His daughter or son was growing right now. He repressed the urge to cry or worship her. He whispered with awe, “I can’t believe you are having our child.” He looked at her. “You are a miracle.”

“Said the man who took a knife to the heart and lived.” Her hand swiped over the scar.

“I didn’t live.” Jon could feel the dark mood beginning to take over and tried to fight it. It would only be a few hours before they were on land and firmly back in reality. He wanted to soak up every last happy moment between them before it could be snatched away by responsibilities. Such things had no place in this bed this night.

Daenerys’ brow furrowed. “Jon, there aren’t any northern traditions to ensure strong sons, like eating a wolf’s heart, are there?”

Now it was Jon’s turn to furrow his brow. “No. Why would you think that?”

“No reason,” she answered, but then added. “I could do it though. I could eat wolf’s heart to make our son strong.” Jon’s look of confusion grew. Daenerys finished. “I was just curious.”

“Could be a daughter,” he said softly.

“What?”

“You keep saying son. It could be a girl.”

“I want to give you a son, Jon.”

“I would love a daughter too, Daenerys.”

She kissed him, and it didn’t take long for it to turn heated. Jon rolled Dany beneath him and she clawed his back in response. Dragons are never tamed, Jon thought, but they can be ridden.

He rode her for hours that night, touching her constantly.

Daenerys sat in front of the mirror, lost in her thoughts. How had life led her to this moment? She was about to marry a man she loved, the best man she had ever met, and she was pregnant with his child. How could life be so sweet when it never had been before?

She supposed it might just be the gods evening out the scores. They threw an army of the dead at
the world when she returned to take back her home, but they also gifted her with Jon Snow, Aegon Targaryen, to be by her side as she helped him fight them. So even as they faced an impossible task, at least they were no longer facing it alone.

Her heart fluttered as she thought of Jon. She had searched her entire life for family, for home, who knew it had been hiding in Winterfell this entire time? She never would have guessed that broody, stubborn king would have ever been more than a thorn in her side when she first met him.

There was a light knock at her door, one that Daenerys recognized. “Enter,” she called out.

Missandei came in. She was smiling though it didn’t reach her eyes. Daenerys understood. She would be even worse if she had lost Jon. Her friend had such strength, even in her grief. Daenerys couldn’t help but admire her. She stood and took her friend’s hand, squeezing it. They exchanged no words, they weren’t needed.

Daenerys looked at herself in the full mirror, even with the added bulk of furs and the cleverness of her dressmaker, her baby bump was almost visible, if one knew to look for it. They wouldn’t have been able to put this wedding off much longer, Daenerys realized. Though she could have faced the scrutiny of marrying a man while clearly pregnant. It wouldn’t have won her any favors, but she had faced worse.

Missandei guided her queen to sit again, so she could do her hair. She had brought the new crown with her, to make sure it would work with how she styled her queen’s hair. Daenerys had told her friend the day before that she was no handmaid, she needn’t do this, but Missandei insisted. Daenerys was glad for it now. She couldn’t imagine sharing the moments before her wedding with anyone else.

Tyrion came in at one point to take the crown back, he complimented the queen on her beauty to which Daenerys thank him for. He seemed to want to say more, but instead walked away with a bow.

When she finished Missandei sat on the chair need her. “The others will be here soon, but how are you feeling?” She looked to Daenerys’ stomach meaningfully.

By others, she meant the ladies in waiting that would attend to Daenerys, which included Lord Manderly’s granddaughters and other noblewomen and girls. Daenerys had requested some women who were from the smallfolk and lesser families, as well as the Dothraki and Free Folk, despite everyone’s concerns.

Daenerys’ hand drifted to her stomach, which it did a lot these days. “I’m fine. Feeling better most days.” She still wasn’t eating much, but she remembered from Rhaego that the feeling would pass. Soon she would want enough blood meat to feed Drogon.

Missandei stood to get the door and allow the other maids in, but first she leaned over and kissed her queen on her forehead. “You deserve this, my queen. I’m so glad you found what makes you happy.” Tears shone in Missandei’s eyes. “Never let it go. Never let anyone take it from you.”

He would remember this day for as long as he lived. He would tell his grandchildren about it if the gods ever blessed him with a wife and strong children. The wedding of the Dragon Queen and the Bastard King, a Song of Ice and Fire, people were already calling it, would be sung about for
As a orphan and child, he wasn’t important enough to have a good seat, but the queen and king had allowed anyone who wished to attend join in. Being small had its advantages and he’d twisted his way into a place where he could see everything.

The king stood under the weirtree, looking as a king should. With a straight back, an impressive sword strapped to him, and gleaming armor. His friend Dyana told him once she thought the king was pretty, but he thought that was just a thing stupid girls said. The king was a warrior, and warriors weren’t pretty.

The queen was pretty though. She was dressed in white furs, her short hair loose and her cheeks pink. He didn’t think anyone else in the kingdom was lovelier than the queen. She was a Targaryen queen and she looked like the people he’d heard about in the stories. Silver-haired, violet-eyed, and beautiful, plus she could ride a dragon. He hoped he’d get to see the dragons too. Dyana had seen them when the queen had come the first time and hadn’t shut up about it since then. He had to see at least one dragon today.

The ceremony bored him. The king and queen didn’t seem bored though even though they were just looking at each other and smiling. Still, he wished there was fighting or something interesting going on.

When the name Aegon Targaryen was said there was a bit of commotion, but he didn’t understand why. He wasn’t even sure why they had used the conqueror's name, was it a Targaryen thing? He didn’t know such things. Royals and rulers were weird and understood many things he never would. He just wanted to get himself a shop someday and make enough to support himself and a wife and any children they might have. He wasn’t sure what kind of shop he wanted yet, but Dyana told him he was good at making bowls. Perhaps he’d be a potter.

They were kissing now, the king and queen, which embarrassed him. He looked away from it. It was gross and he didn’t want to see it. Why did adults do that? Touch mouths with each other? He thought about doing it with Dyana once, but she would just laugh at him.

Though the king and queen seemed to enjoy it, as it went on forever. They were both grinning when they finally stopped. Then they were proclaimed king and queen of the Seven Kingdoms. He found this less boring though it seemed like a lot of words to him. Crowns were brought out and both the queen and king knelt.

The queen was crowned by her dwarf. Her crown was three dragons dancing around her head, one obsidian, one jade and one white-gold. He rolled his eyes at it, he knew if Dyana was here she would say it was pretty, but who cared about pretty?

The king’s crown was much better. It looked like a combination of the Winter Kings of old and Aegon the Conqueror’s, iron and rubies. Some old man missing some fingertips crowned him. Both men looked happy when the king stood again and they clasped each other’s shoulders.

Then the queen and king took each other’s hands and looked out into the crowd. Everyone knelt before them and he followed the crowd’s direction. He didn’t know much, but he knew you knelt to kings and queens and if you didn’t they removed your head. He bowed his head, just to make sure he was doing it right.

But his attention went to the skies when he heard the dragons’ roars. They flew low and were amazing, if also terrifying. He swore he could see the green one’s scales it was so close.
Then the most amazing thing happened, the dragons landed in front of the king and queen. It caused all the lords and ladies to abandon their seats of honor to jump out of the way. The sight made the boy smile. Even fancy lords bent to the wills of dragons.

Both monarchs approached the dragons. The queen patted the massive black one with a smile, like Dyana when she pet that mangy alley dog she insisted was her friend. The king looked more wary of the green one, but the boy knew the king wasn’t scared. Heroes never were. He patted the other one’s snout too.

The queen climbed on her mount and then looked to her king with a raised eyebrow. The king turned away from the crowd so the boy didn’t see how he looked, but then the king climbed on the green dragon.

Two dragonriders. The boy grinned. He was so glad he’d come now. The boring parts had been worth it. He had a much better story than Dyana’s dumb thing about seeing dragons in the sky once. He watched as the dragons flew away, the king and queen on their backs.

Targaryen dragonriders, a king and his queen, flying off on dragons together. It was amazing to see.

Dyana would be so jealous of him.

“I’m not sure how you manage to look so cool and collected when you ride your dragon. That was the most terrifying thing I’ve ever done, and I’ve stood between two armies charging each other before.” Jon’s fingers were threaded with his queen’s, his wife’s, as they lay near a hot spring they’d found earlier in the week. Both had decided they wanted one real moment of privacy to celebrate their wedding before returning to their duties. They had practiced in secret, and the dragon had let Jon pet him and even mount him once before, but still Jon had worried that Rhaegal might eat him at his own damn wedding.

They had already consummated their marriage once, as soon as they had dismounted, with the adrenaline from flying still coursing in their veins. It had been so quick that neither had disrobed, so now they were resting still somewhat clothed, head to feet, holding hands to keep a connection between them.

Jon was pretty sure it would forever be the happiest moment of his life.

Daenerys laughed softly. “You can always go back to riding a horse.”

“No,” Jon said. “I think I’ll figure it out.” He leaned up to kiss her, which she returned with a smile. Jon stayed sitting up, and reluctantly Daenerys joined him. Jon’s head turned when he heard one of the dragon’s cry out. They had gone off hunting after they’d landed. Jon still couldn’t quite tell them apart, but he asked, “Drogon?”

Daenerys smiled, “Yes. Rhaegal was always my quiet one. He fits you well.” She looked a bit sad. “I guess he’s your Rhaegal now.”

Jon kissed her again. “You will always be the dragons’ mother. Nothing will change that. I just get to ride one of them.” Jon thought he might not even get to do that if he ever pissed Daenerys off. Her sons liked him, but they would always be protective of her.
Daenerys’ other hand began to play with Jon’s collar. “I don’t know that I’ll ever decide which
dragon is my favorite to ride, you or Drogon.”

It makes Jon laugh fully, a beautiful, rare sound. His free hand snuck under her skirt to play with
her nude leg. “I know the feeling.” He looked up at her through lowered lashes. “Though I think
you’ll always be my favorite dragon.”

Daenerys grinned and then leaned forward to kiss him. “Don’t tell my dragons, but you may be
mine.”

Jon grinned. “Your secret’s safe with me, my queen.”

She leaned back, which caused Jon to let out a disappointed groan. “What was your first
impression of me?” Daenerys asked.

Jon remembered how ashamed he’d been when he first met Daenerys, the lust he’d felt for her and
how it seemed like he was betraying the Starks by wanting their enemy. His father had fought to
overthrow hers and all he could think of was how he wanted fuck her.

“I thought you looked like a queen,” he told her. “A cold one at that.”

“But did you want to fuck me?” Her smirk told him she already knew the answer.

He hesitated. “No.”

“You are a terrible liar, Jon Snow.”

He blushed. “I’m pretty sure you do that on purpose though. Make men lust after you.”

“Of course I do it on purpose, what kind of queen would I be if I didn’t use every tool in my
arsenal?”

Jon smiled at his queen. He admitted, “I wanted to fuck you. I dreamed of it that first night on
Dragonstone. I had been so ashamed and angry by it. I wasn’t supposed to feel anything for you,
least of all attraction. I’d spent most of my life as a celibate and all of my attention had been on the
north and the threat behind the wall. I didn’t even think to worry about such a thing. Then I
dreamed of fucking you that first night I meet you and I knew I was in trouble.”

Daenerys smiled at his confession. She then made one of her own, looking at their entwined
fingers rather than his face. “When I first realized that you were the shadow-faced lover I’d
dreamed of for years, I thought it was a mistake. I convinced myself that it was just my annoyance
with you was so great that it spilled into my dreams. But then I began to know you, and my feeling
for you grew. When I next had the dream, with your face as clear as it is now, I cried when I awoke
because I knew it was true. I knew...I knew there would be no other man for me but you.”

Jon kissed her then, unable and unwilling to stop himself. His hands fell to her back and he pulled
her into his lap. Daenerys’ knees fell open as she straddled his lap, grinding into him as their
tongues dueled. He loved this woman, so much it frightened him at times. He would die for her; he
would kill for her; he would gladly walk through all seven hells just to see her smile.

He pulled back, licking her as he did so. His hands began to tear open her wedding dress. He knew
it was likely she would be cross with him for destroying it, but he also knew he needed her naked,
now. Jon would worship his wife all night, hoping to convey just a fraction of the love he felt for
her.
As soon as the dress was open and a breast was free, Jon bent his head to take the bud in his mouth. His action made Daenerys hiss, her fingers going into his hair and tugging on it slightly. Jon only took it as encouragement and moved to the other breast, still playing with the nipple he’d wettened with his thumb. Daenerys gasped, her hips grinding against his. Jon bit back a groan, wanting to focus on her for as long as he was able.

He forced the gown down and off, staring at his queen’s nude body. His queen. She was his now. He’d never felt so lucky, so blessed. How had he managed to get her? What had she ever seen in him? He felt her lift his chin with her finger, “Stop it. Whatever you are thinking now. Stop it.”

Jon looked into her gorgeous violent orbs. She knew him well now. They’d been strangers not so very long ago, but she could tell what he was thinking with a look. He knew he could do the same. He could watch her during council meetings and interrupt every crack in her queen mask. He saw every irritation, every joy, everything.

He captured her lips with his once more. Her hands reached for his clothes, as she tried to force them off. But he was distracting her well, and she made no progress. Jon took advantage of this, his hands moving down her body until he reached her thatch. He teased her lips with his fingers and then circled her clit with his thumb when he plunged into her with his digits. He didn’t stop until she fell apart in his arms, kissing her all the while.

Finally, he took pity on her, and removed his clothes, laying her on the makeshift bed of their discarded furs. He paused, looking down at her, his thumb tracing her lips, her cheek, her chin. She was so beautiful, and fierce, and courageous. He could live a thousand years and never find another woman like her.

When he entered her, it felt like he was home.

There were no actual records of the Children of the Forest, just legends and stories, really. The little information they had wasn’t reliable, a maester could spend a lifetime writing about the topic and not have much.

Archmaester Ebrose now wished some enterprising soul had attempted such a feat now. His eyes ached from trying to read the scribbles of barely literate First Men. He was tired of trying to interpret metaphors and grandiose language into actual useful information. Why couldn’t have someone just wrote down, “We ended the Long Night by doing this…”?

If they survived this, that would be the first thing he did. Though he guessed if the solution this time around was dragons, it might not be too helpful for anyone who’s last name wasn’t Targaryen. There was no evidence there would be any other Targaryens after Daenerys passed on. Or any more dragons once hers passed.

He pulled out a rudimentary book, a few pages bounded together with a single crude ring of metal. It had been filed away as containing information about the wall. Archmaester Ebrose began to read. First it described the dimensions of the wall and then began to speak about the united efforts of the Children of the Forest and the First Men to seal away evil. Men would guard the wall as watchers and the Children’s magic would prevent any passing.

Archmaester Ebrose noticed something odd about this tome, which repeated a lot of information
he’d read a countless number of times. It was written in the first person. There was no flowery language of poets, more instruction and dimensions. He thought about it and realized what these documents were, they were just that - instructions.

This forgotten booklet was Bran the Builder’s last remaining plans for the wall. He nearly dropped the pages in his surprise. There was never any evidence of the great builder but legends. Yet this had been hidden away in the vaults of the Citadel? How had no one noticed?

But then, when was the last time any maester really did research on the wall or ancient tales of the Long Night? First the Andals came, changing Westeros forever, and history focused more on them than the First Men, whose bloodlines were mostly confined to the north. Then the dragons came, everything changed again and the focus turned to Valyria.

He studied the words with a more careful eye, going over every word and detail. Then he noticed something, a smudge that might be more. Carefully, he picked up the crumbling papers to bring them under a glass that showed details the eye alone might miss. He looked and saw an ancient language, one that had been lost to time, except for one old maester’s work to rebuild it for translations. One that Archmaester Ebrose had learned on a lark years before. One that he could read without assistance. What it said was what they had been searching for.

He sent for their fastest rider to send word to the king immediately, as this information was too important to trust to raven.
Sorry for the wait. The one plus side of a season like that is that as a fan fic writer, it really lowers the bar. I can do better than that Emmy-nominated season. Hell, I’ve done better than the professionals.

The king and queen sat at the high table, crowns on their heads and looking every inch royalty. Name aside, Jon wasn’t comfortable in fine clothes and with the weight of the crown. He wanted to remove this costume, but both Daenerys and Tyrion insisted -- they were queen and king, they needed to dress and act the part. For their child, Daenerys had convinced him. Their son or daughter wouldn’t be safe with Cersei still on the Iron Throne if people doubted Daenerys and Jon’s power. For their child.

Jon’s eyes darted to the bump not quite hidden by Daenerys’ furs. He was going to be a father. It was still both daunting and amazing, more than he could have ever dreamed until he met her.

A northern lord interrupted Jon’s thoughts. “Why should we trust some foreign queen? Why should we risk our necks for some woman we don’t know?”

Jon recognized the newcomer as one of the crannogmen, a Cray. A contingent of houses had come in the last few days. Jon had breathed easier that Howland Reed hadn’t come himself, as he wasn’t ready to face the man whose daughter had died defending the north. The mud men had said little in the proceedings so far, seeming more comfortable watching and figuring out this alliance for themselves.

Jon was ready to come to his wife’s defense, but to his surprise, he didn’t have to. Lord Forrester spoke up for the queen. “She’s here. She’s defending our homes with her dragons and her armies. She’s allied herself with a northern husband, a Stark.” He nodded to Jon, who shifted in his seat. “What more could she do to earn our trust?”

No one had dared speak to Jon about the name he’d used at the wedding except Tormund who’d mocked him for having too many damned names. He had told him he’d be sticking to “King Crow.” The ease of the ways of the Free Folk had made Jon relax and wish his life could be so simple again.

“Is he a Stark though?” Lord Glover eyed Jon suspiciously. “What was that name at the wedding? It wasn’t Stark.”

Tyrion’s eyes fell on Jon. He knew the Hand hadn’t liked the public announcement. He thought it would be best in these tense times to keep things simple, whereas the truth was too complicated for people.

Daenerys, who’d stayed silent, answered, “Jon is both a Stark and a Targaryen. He is also a man of the north.”

Glover sneered at the queen, which made Jon want to leap across the high table and throttle the man. His fingers curled on his armrest instead, his short nails digging into the wood. Glover said,
“Targaryens are all mad. Look at your father, your grace.” He spat the honorific. “His madness was a curse that plagues your family. It was terrible and I will not allow my people to ever suffer under it again.”

“You think I know nothing of the Targaryen madness? I lived with it. I grew up beside it. I was completely subject to it. I know more about the cruelty it creates than any of you ever will.” Jon could hear the steely anger in his queen’s voice, even as he admired her control.

Glover opened his mouth again, just to be interrupted by Lord Mazin, “Oh, shut up, Glover. You didn’t fight the dead. You sat safe in your castle while your men and the rest of us fought. While the Dragon Queen and her foreign armies fought. She is my queen and yours. Don’t you speak another word against her, or I’ll come over there and slice out your tongue myself.”

Jon nearly grinned at one of his bannermen saying what he’d wanted to say himself. He glanced over at Daenerys. She was still wearing her queenly mask, but Jon could see through that now, and he could see the happiness in his wife’s eyes at the defense. He’d never been so proud. A northerner’s trust was hard earned, but strong once forged.

He decided to speak now, “Lord Blackmyre is the Neck ready to hold against the dead?” The plan was to set up a final line of defense at the narrowest point in Westeros. Ravens had been sent to the other kingdoms to support the North and Daenerys’ people there, but Jon didn’t hold out much hope in that. The southern wars had cost too many men and with Cersei still on the Iron Throne, people were still waiting for an outcome on the final fight.

Sometimes, Jon wished he hadn’t talked Daenerys out of burning the Red Keep. They would be in a stronger position now if she had.

Lord Blackmyre and his son stepped forward, “Aye, we may struggle to feed y’all, but we are ready to defend our lands against the dead.” His eyes narrowed. “Let them come to the bogs and swamps where we will melt their ice.”

Jon had heard stories of the bogs and swamps of the neck, even though he’d never been. He wondered now if it was because Ned Stark wanted to keep him far away from the only other man who knew the truth of Jon’s parentage. Still, Jon thought, the Reeds might be the most loyal bannermen the Stark had. If the Boltons had known what Lord Reed did, Jon would surely be dead by now.

He said, “The dead will bring winter with them. We cannot rely on the warmth of the swamps. Only fire, dragonglass and Valyrian steel can destroy them.”

A cloud of gloom settled over the room at Jon’s words. Many of the dead had died at Winterfell, but not enough. Many of there men had died at Winterfell, too many. Those who had fought the dead remembered the fallen and the terror caused by the enemy, as the crannogmen seemed to grow nervous.

Ser Davos attempted to lighten the mood by asking Lord Manderly, “How is the evacuation coming?”

It had been decided that the North would be evacuated, anyone who couldn’t fight was to board a ship to carry them to Dorne, who had responded to the queen’s message that they could find shelter there. The leadership was still in chaos as three Martell cousins were still fighting for control, so it was more difficult to get their armies north, but all three contenders had agreed that Dorne wouldn’t turn its back on the North in its time of need.
Jon still wasn’t sure if he trusted the snakes in the sand, but he had little choice. Lord Manderly answered, “Slowly, but surely.” He glanced at the queen. “More boats would make the process go faster.”

“Wood is in short supply in this Long Night, Lord Manderly.” Her violet eyes softened. “Do the best you can, my lord.”

Manderly nodded. Jon knew the man wasn’t pleased by his plans being upset, but he also knew the man would do his duty. For all his faults, he was loyal and true.

Jon stood up, ending the meeting, as there was much to do, “It’s decided then, let’s prepare to journey to Moat Caitlin then Greywater Watch.”

Theon could almost feel the moment the ship entered northern waters again. He closed his eyes and inhaled the salt in the air deeply. He was home.

Daario came up beside him, studying Seal Rock. “Not much to look at.”

Theon glared. He knew after seeing the Titan of Braavos, the Wolf’s Den of White Harbor might not look like much, but he still didn’t appreciate this man slagging off his home. “The Wolf’s Den used to be the seat of House Manderly, but once they built New Castle, it turned into a jail. The…”

Daario interrupted, “I don’t need the history lesson.” His eyes scanned the skies. “Where are the dragons?”

Theon looked up as well. “I’m not sure. It’s possible the queen isn’t here.” Theon only hoped she’d left word that they weren’t to be harmed. He’d hate to wind up in a dungeon for his past crimes against the Starks, even if he did deserve it.

They landed without incident, which made him happy enough. As he helped his crew unload, Theon began to wonder who would greet them. He noticed how busy the place was. Though the rest of the boats seemed to either be loading to leave or being grounded. He wondered what he’d missed.

He looked up to the unnaturally dark sky again. What had happened while he was gone?

Jorah was the one who finally came to greet them, with Missandei and a few northern lords in tow. The older knight didn’t look thrilled to see the sellsword. “Why are you here already?”

Daario bowed with a flourish, “I come to serve our queen, as we all do.” He smirked at the older man. “Some more than others.”

Jorah looked like he swallowed something sour. Theon stepped in. “Where is the queen? We have much to tell her.”

Missandei said, “She is feeding her children at the moment. We are preparing to head to the Neck, but I can take you to the king.”

King? Theon exchanged a look with Daario who was just as surprised and confused. Still, they followed Missandei without comment.
Theon, not comfortable with the dirty looks the northern lords were giving him, hung back with Jorah and Daario, who were needling each other. Daario asked, “So she found a new lover in Westeros, eh?”

“No. She found her king in Westeros. You just missed the wedding.”

“So she found her king in Westeros. You just missed the wedding.”

“Who?”

Theon guessed, “It’s Jon, isn’t it?” He didn’t wait for Jorah’s answer before adding, “The way they were eye-fucking each other at that meeting, she’s probably already pregnant.” Under his breath Theon added, “Never seen Jon like that with any girl. Always thought there was something wrong with him.”

Daario heard it though. “What? Didn’t he like girls?”

Theon was taken aback that he’d been heard. “No, he liked girls. Just…I don’t know…Jon always lived like a celibate even before he took his vows.”

“A celibate? Good gods, who chooses to spend their life that way?” Daario grimaced.

“Many of the most honorable orders in Westeros demand a vow of celibacy from their members. Jon Snow was a member of the Night’s Watch.” A sad look passed over the old bear’s face and Theon guessed he was remembering his father.

“Just another reason why honor is overrated,” Daario shrugged. “Did you say his name was Jon? King Jon? Not very impressive.”

Throwing an old jab back at him, Jorah answered, “Well, he’s younger than either of us. And from what I heard, he rides the dragon just fine. All night, in fact.” Theon was never shy around such talk, but it made him feel somewhat self conscious these days.

Daario glared at Sir Jorah. “How do you know that?”

“Tyrion wanted to complain and thought I’d be a sympathetic ear. Apparently, they got increasingly noisy during a boat trip north, so Tyrion had a talk with Daenerys, which made her get even louder. Luckily for everyone else, that embarrassed Jon and they quieted after that.” Jorah seemed pained to say it.

Theon glanced at Daario to see how he would take this information, but the sellsword didn’t seem bothered. The two men continued to needle each other about dragon riding, but Theon tuned out where he once reveled in such dirty talk.

Reek still lingered it seemed.

Theon recognized Jon’s silhouette almost immediately. He’d changed much from the bastard boy Theon once knew, but they all had. Even without wearing a crown, Jon looked as much a king as Robb had. Theon wondered what Robb would have thought of his bastard brother now.

Jon wasn’t happy to see him, but he wasn’t angry anymore either. He mostly looked confused, his eyes traveled over Daario who returned the curious gaze. Jorah introduced the newcomer, “This is Daario Naharis, Commander of the Second Sons.”

Jon held out a hand, “Wow, Varys works fast, we weren’t expecting you for some time.”

Theon wondered what that meant. Varys had nothing to do with the arrival of the Second Sons. He
thought it would take some time to play catch up on what had happened in his absence. The sun was gone, Jon was king, what else had happened?

Daario took Jon’s hand and shook it, Theon could tell from Jon’s slight wince the grip had been tight. But Daario smiled at the king and asked, “I’m new to Westerosi customs. What do I call you? King Jon? Your Grace? Jon?”

Jon took his hand away. “It doesn’t matter,” he brushed off. He motioned for them to follow him and this time Theon found himself next to Jon.

Theon still wasn’t sure what his relationship with Jon was anymore. They had never really been friends, but he didn’t think they were enemies either. There was too much history for them to just act like political allies, but there wasn’t enough love between them to be able to put aside the nastier parts of that history.

Theon decided to focus on the one person that had always united them: Robb Stark. “If only Robb could see us now.” Jon’s hard features softened a bit at his brother’s name and Theon continued, “This isn’t how I ever pictured it turning out. You married, me...” He looked down at his crotch and broke off.

Jon understood. “Not what I imagined either.” He nearly smiled, which Theon found surprising, but then his face settled back into its usual frown again. “Robb should have been here.”

Theon nodded and said, “I didn’t get to see his wedding either. It was stupid of him, but you can’t tell a man in love anything.”

“Robb was like that,” Jon remembered. “If he thought he was right, no one could convince him otherwise.”

“Nah,” Theon said. “You were the stubborn one. Robb bitched about it all the time. I remember once he told me that mules were more yielding than you.”

Jon gave a light chuckle. Theon asked, “How are the rest of the Starks? Are they here?”

Jon inhaled deeply before he answered, “Bran is here. Arya is gods know where. And Sansa...” Jon stopped and gathered himself before he continued, “Sansa died when Winterfell was overrun with the dead. She sacrificed herself to blow up the keep and take as many of the enemy with her as possible.”

Theon was floored by this information, and his eyes filled with tears before he could even try to stop them. Sansa. She’d been through so much, too much, only to die. Winterfell, the only real home Theon had ever known, was gone.

Theon looked at the darkened sky, finally understanding the threat they were facing. Finally he knew why this was the great war. He still had an obligation to rescue Yara, but this fight just might be more important.

They went the rest of the distance in silence, both men lost in their own morose thoughts. They entered a room in New Castle that had a massive map of Westeros spread across the table. He recognized some of the sigils being used to represent army movements and guessed at some of the others. A horse for the Dothraki, a spear for the Unsullied and plain, black pieces for the armies of the dead.

Jon’s eyes swept over what must be a familiar map. He pointed at the gold pieces in King’s Landing that Theon hadn’t noticed before. “We’ve received reports that the Golden Company has
landed in King’s Landing. With the Army of the Dead north and the Golden Company south, we need to ensure we don’t get trapped between the two and destroyed.”

Theon looked at the map, searching for Greyjoy sigils. “Where’s Euron?” he asked.

Jon pointed to a marker in King’s Landing. “The Greyjoy fleet brought in the Golden Company. Last we heard, they were still in King’s Landing.”

Theon nodded. Daario stepped up. “Essos fighters understand Essos armies best, you should send the Second Sons and whatever of the queen’s forces you can spare to guard your back against the Golden Company.”

Jon looked confused and replied carefully, “Yes, that was the plan.”

Daario walked around the table, with a casual predator-like grace. “Your name is Snow? That’s an astonishingly appropriate last name for a northman.”

Jon’s mouth tightened into a straight line and Theon could tell how tense he’d gotten. Jon always got tense when someone brought up his parentage. Theon had used to love getting a rise out of the younger man for it, but now it just felt like a mean thing to do. “It’s a bastard’s name.”

Daario’s head inclined, “Yet you are a king. Seems like there’s quite a story there.”

The king’s dark gaze met his, and Theon saw the threat in it. He nearly stepped back. He’d seen Jon mad so often, but this was the first time Theon had ever really feared Jon’s temper. “Did you need something from me, Commander of the Second Sons?”

“This is your homeland. I wanted to pick your brain as to how you might defeat elephants.” Daario’s charm was back now, and Theon relaxed.

Jon didn’t though he nodded. They went over battle plans, every man making modifications and suggestions based on their knowledge. Theon knew the sea, Daario knew the Essos enemy, and Jon knew the undead one.

It almost passed without further incident, but as the men finished their planning, standing and stretching their recently hunched backs, Daario asked, “So what do you think of our queen, King Snow?”

Jon stiffened as if the sellsword had pointed a dagger at him. His voice didn’t betray him though, “I hold her in high regard. I wouldn’t follow her otherwise. I wouldn’t have married her otherwise.”

Daario’s gaze held mischief. “Yes, we all love to serve our queen. With our swords. Or on our knees.”

Jon sneered and he threatened the commander, “I know that you are from Essos, so you may not understand our customs in Westeros yet. But one of them is not to speak of the queen in such a manner. I suggest you stop doing it.” Jon leaned in. “Or you may lose your head, and we cannot afford to lose any good fighting men.”

Daario’s eyebrow lifted and Theon wondered where this fire in Jon came from. Jon had always been cold and usually in control. He hung back and watched. He’d had a temper but he kept it tightly controlled. Theon knew they had all changed, but now he wished he might have talked to Jon more about what had happened to the man in the years they’d been apart. What had the Wall been like for Jon? How had it changed him? For the first time, Theon missed the bastard boy he’d loved to mock.
Daario joked, “You going to sic your executioner on me then? Think he’s good enough to take down a man who was raised in fighting pits?”

“No, the custom in the north is that the man who passes the sentence swings the blade.” Jon’s eyes swept over Daario’s body and landed on his eyes. He said nothing, but everyone understood what went unsaid. Yeah, I think I am good enough take you.

“There time, King Snow.” Daario grinned.

Jon’s eyes narrowed for a moment before he said. “We should do some scouting. All of our planning is for nothing if the situation has changed after all.”

Daario replied, “I’ll send men to fetch horses.”

“Oh, I don’t need a horse.” The king walked away.

Theon wondered what that meant.

Daenerys climbed off of Drogon, both of them refreshed from a successful hunt. Drogon had healed nicely from his battle wounds. She’d asked Jon to join her on Rhaegal, but he’d begged off, as he had much to plan with the logistics of moving their army while keeping them protected for anything the Night King might have planned. But as she looked around, she found that Jon was walking towards her, almost as if the connection she had always shared with her children now extended to Jon.

It might be possible, she thought. After all, Jon was a Targaryen and now rode Rhaegal. Maybe that was a thing.

She wished she knew. So much had been lost with the dragons. While she understood why her ancestors might keep their secrets when it came to their most powerful tool -- their dragons -- it made it hard for her to know what was considered normal with her own.

She began to smile at the sight of her husband but it dropped when she saw who accompanied him. What was Daario doing here?

Daenerys pushed the question aside to hug Jon in greeting. His eyes crinkled in response though his smile didn’t extend beyond that. Her thumb brushed over his lips. Her sad man. She never would have expected to fall so hard for a man like Jon Snow.

He pulled her hand away and his eyes darted at Drogon, who was looking at the group with interest. Jon said, “I need Rhaegal. Can you call him for me?”

Daenerys reached out in her mind for him, but chastised Jon, “You should be able to do this yourself. Can’t you feel the connection with him?”

Jon looked to the north. “Sort of. But it’s not like with Ghost, or what you have with them. You’ve been with them since their birth, like I raised Ghost since he was a pup, but with Rhaegal.” Jon paused. “I think we’re still getting to know each other.”

Daenerys nodded, but she knew it was important that Jon learn this for himself. As Rhaegal landed,
she asked, “Do you remember the commands?”

Jon tried to say the foreign words in his northern accent, making Daenerys smile at his hopelessness. “Rhaegal isn’t going to understand any of that. Do you want me to accompany you?”

Jon’s eyes darted to the men who’d accompanied him. “I would always love you too, but it should be a short trip and I think you need to be told about our plans.”

Daenerys could feel Daario’s eyes on her, and she wanted to ask Jon to stay. Not that Daario would behave with Jon’s presence, but she just didn’t want to deal with the man alone. But she knew that Jon was right. She sighed, “You are going to have to learn Valyrian, Jon.”

“After we defeat the dead, I’ll have plenty of time on my hands. Missandei can teach me.” He kissed her on the cheek. Jon smiled at her, a rarity Daenerys knew to enjoy. “And I promise I’ll be more patient with her than when Maester Luwin tried to teach me.”

Jon got on Rhaegal and flew away. Daenerys watched, feeling like a sailor’s wife, standing on the dock, watching her husband leave her. Theon and Daario were stupefied. Theon said, “Since when does Snow ride dragons?”

“You’ve been gone for some time, Lord Greyjoy,” Daenerys’ eyes connected with Daario’s. “A lot has changed, including Jon Snow becoming the last dragonrider.”

Daario’s eyes widened and he looked away, which Daenerys hoped meant he understood what she was telling him. She turned to them fully now. “What do you need to tell me?”

Theon stepped forward with an awkward bow. He caught her up with the battle plans they had discussed in her absence. Daenerys nodded through it, her eyes glancing at Daario who seemed to be studying her intently. When finished she looked to Daario and asked, “But I don’t understand, why are you here? Surely Varys couldn’t have worked that fast.”

Daario gave a little bow, reminding her of that causal arrogance she had once found charming about him. “My place is by my queen’s side.”

“No, it’s not. I have already made that clear.” Her eyes narrowed. “Did you leave without your queen’s permission?”

Daario seemed to stand straighter and his eyes narrowed as well, “You need me. You need our help. Shouldn’t you be grateful I and my men are here before expected? The Golden Company won’t wait for you to be ready for their attack.”

Daenerys swallowed her anger and looked to the rest of the group. “You are dismissed.”

Most left without a fight, but Jorah was clearly reluctant to leave her alone with the sellsword. Daenerys put her arm on her old bear to reassure him, and Drogon growled behind her. No harm would come to her with her son at her side. He would roast anyone who tried.

Alone, Daenerys turned and looked at Daario and really saw him. He was handsome. He was clever. He was a rogue that had captured her attention once. But he was also a bragget and show off. He was also a killer and a criminal. Why was she still being forced to speak with him? She had hoped to be done with him. “Is that why you’re really here? To help me?”

“Of course I missed you, my queen.” Daario’s eyes went to the sky in the direction Jon had flown off to. “Though I’m not sure you would say the same.”
“Is that going to be a problem?” Daenerys’ hands clasped together. “You will have to obey him as you would me. He is my king.”

“Like Hizdahr zo Loraq was?”

“No,” Daenerys said. “Not like Hizdahr.” She could feel the slight bump beneath her folded hands. “I love Jon. I am his and he is mine.” Her eyes connected with Daario’s. “And we do not share.”

Daario nodded. His face hardened even as he smiled, “It could be a problem though. If the people of Westeros found out their beloved queen had a sellsword warming her bedchamber.”

Her hands clenched together in an effort to fight her rage. How dare he. Daenerys rose herself up to her full height and attempted to appear to look down on him, despite their height difference. “I know you never cared for politics. Not the politics of Essos and certainly not Westeros. But let me educate you a bit.” She stepped forward. “Here, I am the Mad King’s daughter. My father would burn people alive for the fun of it and then rape my mother in his joy of such evil.” She let her words sink in. “The rumors about me here are that I am much the same, only I use my dragons rather than wildfire. They say that I murdered my brother as well as my last two husbands and am already planning to do the same to my newest one. They say I am a witch who picked up savage rituals in Essos to bend men into doing my will. They say that I have infected their land with savages from the east and terrorize them with my dragons. That I fucked a sellsword in Essos would be the least interesting rumor about me. Tell whoever you want, but I never wish to see you again.”

She walked away from him. Never to look back. Daenerys wasn’t foolish enough to think that Daario wouldn’t still cause trouble, but she knew that Jon wouldn’t care what Daario said or did. Her love with her king was secure. He would not doubt her, just as she would not doubt him. Her hand went to her growing belly. Their child would know loving parents that neither her nor Jon had had for themselves. Parents who loved their children as much as each other.

She smiled at the warm thought.

Jon was looking over the messages he’d gotten from Varys, numbers for the Golden Company. He needed to speak to Bran, get numbers for the Army of the Dead as well. Jon knew the best military advice concerning two front wars was: don’t do it. But Jon didn’t start either of these wars, and he was stuck fighting both at the same time.

At least the new mercenary group was here, adding to fresh troops to their numbers. He tried to remember the history between the various different companies from Essos, but that had always been limited.

Jon knew where Bran was, so he decided that he would go see him. His ride on Rhaegal had been informative, as he had seen what roads were blocked by snow, but he still didn’t know where the Army of the Dead was, didn’t know if Euron’s fleet was still docked at King’s Landing.

The Three-Eyed Raven would know.
The boy found Tyrion by chance, after all the Queen’s Hand was one of the most recognizable men on the continent. “Lord Hand, I have an urgent message from the Citadel for the King and Queen.”

Tyrion quirked an eyebrow. “They couldn’t send it by raven?”

“No, sir,” the boy answered. “They said it was too important.”

Tyrion held out his hand, but the boy hesitated. Tyrion sighed. “I’m the Queen’s Hand, handing the message to me is the same as handing it to her.”

The boy’s frown remained but he held out the message and Tyrion snatched it away before he might get different ideas. Tyrion read quickly, growing more horrified by what he read with each word.

The end of the message stood out most to him: “...the stench of the forging pits of Valyria was intense, fueled by the blood of slaves, their deaths the sacrifice required for the magical steel. Fire and blood, the strength of Valyria. True magic was always paid for with blood and death, such as the spells Bran the Builder used in the Wall to keep the Long Night back. The bodies of Children and Men provided mortar for the Wall.”

Tyrion’s mind rolled over the implications. The final secret of the most valuable steel in the world, necessary for the fight they were waging, written in ink in a long lost book. Also the key to defeating the dead, and all they needed were a few thousand dead people for the magic to work. His mind reeled at such knowledge and how to best use it.

He noticed the boy who still watched him. Tyrion’s first instinct was to have the boy imprisoned, possibly even killed. There was no guarantee the messenger hadn’t read the message and this information was too important to get out.

But Tyrion immediately chasited himself for such a thought. That was a Tywin plan, not a Tyrion one. Instead he tried to compose himself and handed the boy the only coin he had, a gold piece, “You’ve done well. Go to the kitchens and get yourself some food. You must be famished after your long ride.”

The boy jogged away with a smile, and Tyrion let his face drop again. He reread the message. Then he read it again.

He had to tell the queen and king, but even as he thought it, he knew he wouldn’t tell them. He doubted either hero would like it, the blood price for victory. He knew they were rulers with ruthless streaks, Targaryens, but Jon Snow had Stark honor and Daenerys relied on his advice heavily.

No. Tyrion couldn’t risk an official order. He couldn’t let them say no. They may need this information later, and he was willing to be the monster everyone thought he was.

A guard passed by and Tyrion called out to him, ordering the boy to be seized and imprisoned once he finished his meal. Tyrion felt uneasy with the command, but he needed time to think.

“You duty to your monarch goes beyond obeying them. You must always act in their best interests, even if it means lying to them. You think I told Aerys everything? You think I gave him the chance to tell me no after his madness took hold?” Tywin’s words echoed in Tyrion’s brain.
Part of Tyrion knew he was doing the right thing, the smart, political and pragmatic thing. His only fear was that he might become the last thing he wanted to be: Tywin Lannister.

Bran’s eyes returned to brown. He hadn’t expected to learn anything that useful when he followed the Hand. He’d merely been browsing through different lives, checking on the status of the world.

He hadn’t expected to learn the secret of the Wall. Bran thought of the times he attempted to go that far back in memory, but he’d always struggled to do so. He thought it was because it was so far back in time, it may have happened before the Three-Eyed Raven existed and therefore he couldn’t see it. He wondered now.

“Bran?” Jon entered the courtyard with the weirwood with all the reverence of a good northern lad.

Bran looked to his brother, already knowing why he was here. “The Army of the Dead is still around Winterfell. The Greyjoy fleet has posted itself around Dragonstone for now, but Euron seems to have plans to move north. The Golden Company is going over the King’s Landing defenses.”

Jon nodded, even though he still seemed unsettled. His brother didn’t understand, couldn’t understand what Bran was now. No one truly understood the Three-Eyed Raven. Bran was beginning to understand why the men before him had closed themselves from society at large. He was weary with these human interactions. His humanity still lingered, but he found himself tiring of it more each day. Jon, once a beloved brother, stood there, clearly wanting to say more, but Bran just wanted to go away. To seek out the memory of the past, to see if what the message from the Citadel said was true.

“Are you okay Bran? I know a lot has happened...with Winterfell...with Sansa.”

Bran no longer felt the emotion he once had at such words. “I have to go now,” was all he said before rolling his eyes back to search for the building of the Wall.

Just as before it was hard to find, but now Bran could feel something actively pushing against him, fighting him. He pushed passed it, forced his way through. Whatever it was, it reminded him of Leaf and the old ancient power that emanated off the Children of the Forest.

Finally, Bran was there, watching his namesake as the Wall was erected in the distance. Bran was shocked to find the line of old men and women, some carrying babes. He used his knowledge of the past and knew that these were the volunteers who didn’t want to burden their families. It was considered a duty in harsh, long northern winters, for the old to walk out and die. The babes were the orphans left over from the previous great war, with no one to care for them and no family willing to take in an extra mouth to be fed. Bran watched as they made their way up the path to where the Wall was, he watched as a soldier slit the throat of whoever presented themselves, old person or baby, letting the blood fall into the mortar and the body follow.

Bran pulled away from the awful sight to look at the legendary Bran the Builder. His expression was hard, as if he were doing something he didn’t like but knew it had to be done. One of the Children of the Forest was next to him, whispering in his ear. Bran couldn’t hear what was being said, but he turned his gaze now to the other line.

Children of the Forest were being dragged to the Wall, they wailed as they were forced into the
stone, forced to become one with the wall. They were absorbed and the Wall grew a little taller, a little thicker, a little stronger. It was almost worse to watch, but as the Children walked back for their next victim they looked straight at Bran.

Unnerved, Bran turned back to the builder to find that Child was looking at him too, scowling yet curious.

They could see him, Bran realized. The Children could see him.

Bran tried to return to his body but the Children were coming for him now. It reminded Bran so much of the Night King. He knew the two were related, he knew the Children had created the Army of the Dead to stop the First Men, but he still didn’t know enough.

His eyes rolled back and he returned, exhausted and scared. He was alone and Bran could tell much time had passed.

But now he knew the secret of the Wall and the magic that kept the dead back for thousands of years. It was the sacrifice of blood of the First Men and the Children of the Forest that kept the Wall powerful. That magic had held against their foe until the power Valyrian fire from a dragon had been obtained by the Night King.

Magic versus magic.

The North remembers.

Fire was not a good idea on a wooden ship. Melissandre knew the captain hated her for disobeying this great law of the sea, but most everyone on this ship was an enemy to her and she sailed to more of her foes. It wouldn’t matter soon, and fire was the only way to find an answer in how to battle the ice.

Those were the words she heard in the fires, “ice” and “fire.” Even now it whispered to her as she desperately tried to understand the flames’ meaning. She had misinterpreted it too often and this fight was too important to lose.

She prayed to the Lord of Light, until finally one more word joined it, “Blood.”

What did it all mean? She willed the boat to go faster. They needed to be in Westeros now, even if she didn’t have all the answers yet. She knew enough. She wrapped her comforter closer to her as she decided to sleep, leaving her necklace in place, in case Varys or Illyrio were spying. The Master of Secrets didn’t need to know hers.

Melissandre never put out a fire, instead she watched the flames die down themselves. She watched as they gasped for breath, cracking the wood and spreading their hot embers. She hated to watch it die.

She repeated to herself as sleep took her, “The night is dark and full of terrors.”
Daenerys studied the battle plans they would be following now. She trusted Jon completely, but what kind of queen would she be if she didn’t know what happened in her own kingdoms with her armies? She longed to touch her shortened hair again, a reminder of her previous failure. She had to do better. She must. The fate of the world depended on her now.

She wanted to cry and break under such pressure, but she refused to give into that urge. Instead she closed her eyes and breathed in and out. In and out. In and out.

When she opened her eyes, she was startled by the presence of her Hand in the room with her. It was odd for Tyrion not to knock before entering. He was no warrior with a cat’s step like Jon or Daario, so she usually heard him walking. She frowned at the thought. Why would Tyrion take the care to disguise his steps around her?

As usual, Tyrion began the conversation, “According to Maester Volmark, the snow should let up in two days time. Though weather predictions never seem all that accurate. It would be a shame to end up stranded on the road. I’m not sure the armies could defend such a vulnerable position.”

Daenerys asked, “Do you suggest we stay here until winter ends?”

Tyrion frowned, “Of course not.” He began to pace around the table and Daenerys joined him, keeping her Hand directly in front of her at all times. “It’s my job to present you with every fact, every possibility.”

She knew that was true. Daenerys appreciated that about Tyrion, he could see every angle of situation. His sharp mind missed almost nothing, despite its glaring weak spot where his family was concerned. She glanced to the map of Westeros. “I’ve been thinking…” she started.

“Oh?” Tyrion asked, with a mix of genuine curiosity as well as some trepidation. Daenerys supposed she could understand that. Monarchs thinking usually meant their Hands would have a lot of work ahead of them.

This time was no exception.

“I’m going to create some new positions on the Small Council. Seven, I think, one for each kingdom. I want these filled by the small folk. I want all of Westeros to get a say in ruling.”

Tyrion’s eyebrow raised and he stopped walking, “You want uneducated, dirty men to sit the Small Council?”

“No, I want men and women who deserve it to have a say. You were born a dwarf, but also a Lannister, if your father had been a farmer, I would have never received your good council. Ser Davos is from Flea Bottom, and he worked his way up because Stannis gave him a chance. We need good men and women in positions of power, regardless of where they came from.”

Daenerys saw that bright look fill Tyrion’s eyes, one she hadn’t seen from him in awhile. It was familiar to her, but still gave her a rush every time she saw it. Hope. Hope for the future. Hope that she could lead them all to it.

She hoped that she could too.

“The ruling council is going well in Meereen. Well, about as well as anything goes.” Through a proxy, Daario had updated her on her kingdoms in Essos. Meereen had stabilized and was beginning to generate income once again. Astopor was still plagued with minor uprisings, but her
newly trained troops were keeping them from full-out revolts. Yunkai’s economy was growing fastest, as the bed slaves merely began charging for their services. The amount of brothels being built in the city was giving everyone work.

Tyrion nodded. “I’ve been reading all I can about Valyria recently.” Daenerys stopped her pacing, giving her Hand her full attention, always desperate for more information about where she’d come from. “It’s so odd to me. The greatest civilization mankind has ever seen, and we know almost nothing about it.” He added wryly, “Then again, who knows if Valyria really was all that great. Maybe their storytellers were just that good. Their civilization was built on the backs of slaves after all.”

“They had dragons,” Daenerys reminded him. The power of old Valyria, the blood that ran through her veins which gave her children.

“And dragons,” Tyrion conceded. “The strength of Valyria, dragons and slaves, fire and blood.” He seemed to be speaking more to himself than her, and she wondered what his point was, but Tyrion was lost in his own thoughts for a moment.

She waited. Finally, he seemed to break out of it, returning to their conversation, “Valyria had many great houses, much like Westeros. But unlike Westeros, no one family ruled over another. They played the great game but on a grander scale. Is that the future you see for Westeros? Is that your plan for breaking the wheel?”

Daenerys’ hand went to her stomach. She didn’t know what her plans were anymore. She had said that as a woman sure she would be the last dragon. She had planned to take the throne, make her changes and let the people sort it out when she was gone.

But what of her child? She knew what it was to grow up in fear. To grow up knowing that you’d been denied your destiny, your birthright. Could she do that to her son or daughter? Leave them in this world without the power to protect themselves?

Drogon would outlive her, she recognized. He would watch over his brother or sister; she needn’t worry about her child’s safety. But Drogon wouldn’t be able to save them from the ugly hearts of men and women. He wouldn’t protect them from the great game.

She didn’t know what to do. She said, “First I need to win the Iron Throne, after we defeat the Army of the Dead. For now, I think expanding the Small Council is enough.”

Tyrion nodded, but Daenerys knew he wasn’t satisfied. She wasn’t sure what to tell him. He swallowed before he said, “Are you sure that marrying Jon Snow was wise? By legitimizing him and giving him a dragon, you have created your own worst enemy.”

Daenerys had hoped this argument would end once she had married. “Even Targaryens generally don’t have wives and husbands warring with each other.”

“Maegor’s wife probably killed him,” Tyrion mumbled. Daenerys was a bit surprised. No one knew for certain what had killed the cruel tyrant, but it was interesting to know where Tyrion’s suspicions lie.”

“Jon loves me,” Daenerys dismissed.

“Yes, I know, but love doesn’t always last. What if 10 years from now, he decides you aren’t fit to rule?”

“Jon would never do that.” She curled her fingers on her stomach. “Or our child.”
Tyrion said nothing, merely licked his lips, but Daenerys understood. He thought she might not give birth to a living child. He sighed. “I know you don’t want to hear this, and part of me doesn’t want to say it, but it’s my duty to point out every possible problem to you, especially ones you might not see yourself.”

“Well, your duty is fulfilled. You are dismissed.”

With a reluctant bow, Tyrion left. Daenerys stewed, thinking over his words. All his plans and worries about the future.

She was so tired. When would she finally have time to rest?

Jon was exhausted when he finally found his bed. No, their bed. The thought of Daenerys as his wife still warmed him. He knew he should be worried. He should be concerned with the fate of the world, but Daenerys as his wife, carrying his child, it dwarfed greater concerns. Jon both feared and loved that feeling. He knew it was natural, but he worried about the dangers it might cause.

Daenerys was already under the furs when he walked in. Ghost lifted his head to greet him, and Jon walked over to pet him, grateful that his closest companion would watch over the person (people) he cared for most.

Even if said person was a queen with dragons and armies already looking out for her.

Jon disrobed and climbed into bed. He thought Daenerys was asleep and carefully scooted over to put his arms around her sleeping form. He wanted to hold her before he fell into sleep.

But as soon as he touched her, Daenerys whispered into the dark, “How was your day, my king?”

Jon felt the edges of his lips lift. He wondered if anyone had ever asked him that. How was his day? It wasn’t much, but it meant a lot to him. She meant everything to him. He kissed the nearest bare skin his lips could reach, her upper arm. “We’re still alive.”

She didn’t need a better answer than that, her hands clutching his arms. He squeezed her more tightly to him. She asked softly, “What did you see in your future, Jon? What were your dreams like?”

“Better than this,” Jon’s words slipped past his lips before he could control them.

Daenerys squeezed him again, “Me too, my love.” She paused before she added, “Tyrion questioned me about my plans for my rule. Questions I don’t have answers for.”

Jon wasn’t sure what to say to that. He would support her in any way. He kissed her skin again, closer to her neck. “I have every faith in you, Dany. You’ll figure it out.”

“We have so much to do before then. So many enemies still left to defeat.” Jon could hear the weariness in her voice, the same he often felt in his bones.

“We will beat them, and you will rule, my queen.” Jon said it with a confidence he wasn’t sure he felt, but he believed in her, if nothing else.

“Thank you, my king.”
Jon held her for a moment, content in this rare quiet moment where no one needed either of them. There were no troop movements to plan. No supply lines that needed to be established. No politics to be played. It was just the two of them, together in this bed. Jon wished he could freeze this moment and live it forever.

His hands moved down to her stomach, where he cradled the child she grew. His child. Jon remembered dreaming of a family, a real family, as a boy. A wife, children, but he’d always thought them beyond his reach. Thought he didn’t deserve them.

Jon kissed Daenerys’ neck now, and she moved to give him better access. His lips trailed down her tendon, as his nostrils inhaled that mixture of foreign oils and cleanliness that was Daenerys.

He loved this woman. So much. He pulled her closer to him, sure she could feel his erection between her cheeks. She gasped at the feeling and he want to flip her down and plow into her like an animal. At the same time, he wanted to stare into her violet eyes and make gentle love to her for hours.

What he did was continue to kiss her neck, softly thrusting his hips against hers, but not taking it any further just yet.

Daenerys arm reached around so that her fingers could clutch his curls. She said, “Did you the Undying ones called me Bride of Fire?” Her voice caught on a moan as Jon’s hand slipped to caress her cunt, her silks still between his strong fingers and her soft flesh. “I should have known who you were, Aegon. I always should have known.”

She did that sometimes now that they were married. She called him Aegon in bed. Jon wasn’t sure if he liked it, but he never told her to stop. He had mostly come to terms with the truth and denying that part of him seemed wrong. It wasn’t the name his beloved Stark father gave him, but it was the one his unknown mother had. He couldn’t deny it, even if it didn’t fit him. His other hand began massaging Daenerys’ breast, plucking her nipple to attention. His lips moved to her ear, “I should learn all of your titles one day. If Missandei isn’t around to announce you, who will take her place?”

“Missandei will always be at my side,” Daenerys said with a surety Jon hoped was well founded. She began to recite her titles, “Queen Daenerys Stormborn of the House Targaryen, the First of her Name, Queen of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, the rightful Queen of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm, Queen of Dragonstone, Queen of Meereen, Khaleesi of the Great Grass See, the Unburnt…”

Jon stopped her, pulling back a fraction, “I’ve always meant to ask, what does that mean? The Unburnt?”

She chuckled, “It’s how my children were born. I walked into my husband’s funeral pyre. Haven’t you heard that story?”

He had, but he still found it incredible. How he wished he could have been there to hear the first song of dragons in a century. “It seems impossible that you walked into a funeral pyre and didn’t die.”

“Oh,” Daenerys’ hands blindly traced over the scars on his chest.

Point taken, Jon thought. “How many lives do you think we have left?”

Daenerys answered, “A wise man once said lives can be cheap or rich, but only dragons get more
than one.”

Jon snorted, “That sounds like something Tyrion would say.” He couldn’t see it, but he was sure Dany had smiled in response.

He decided he was done talking and flipped her over so he could study her features beneath him, or at least what he could make out in the dark room. He’d memorized her by now and he gazed on her. She was so beautiful.

He kissed her on her lips, relishing the taste of her and the softness of her lips. He loved when she began to nip at him with her teeth, clearly impatient for him. But he didn’t give into her demands just yet, capturing her hands as she tried to force his trousers down and placing them above her head.

His fingers intertwined with hers as he thrust himself against her in a way that would have involved him entering her if they weren’t both still clothed. Her legs wrapped around him, and Jon noticed that her stomach was meeting his for the first time. He wondered how much longer they would be able to do this in this position.

Suddenly impatient as she had been, Jon left one of her hands so that he could shove clothes out of their way. He thrust into her this time, breaking off his continuous kiss to hear her gasp. It was a sound he only grew to love more the more times he heard it.

He took her hand again as he slowly loved her. His kisses trailed off to her cheeks and her neck but always returned to her lips. His thrusts remained slow and gentle, but Daenerys still came apart beneath him, her climax surprising her almost as much as him.

He wondered absently if the babe made her more sensitive. He pushed the thought away as he chased after his own end, thrusting until he finished inside of her with a groan.

Normally he would collapse on top of her for a few blissful moments before rolling off, but he was too paranoid now that he might hurt the life growing inside of her and rolled off immediately. Daenerys reached for him, seemingly put off by his distance and the change.

He went into her arms readily. Jon hugged his wife to him, enjoying the feel of her thumb caressing his beard and her nose nuzzling his neck. He was so happy in this moment.

Why couldn’t it last forever?

Arya wasn’t the same girl who’d traveled with the Hound before. She no longer needed his guidance, having survived on her own for years now. Though it went unspoken, she was glad for the company though, and Sandor seemed pleased as well.

Still, Arya’s heart remained with the family she had left, Jon, Bran, and Gendry even. Part of her wished she’d stayed behind. She’d heard stories of the royal wedding and could barely believe that her brother had ridden a dragon, Targaryen blood or not. She wished she had seen it. Wished she’d been there for Jon.

But her feelings weren’t important. Ending the war and killing Cersei, that is where her focus was, where it had to be. She went over her list in her head, the one prayer that had kept her going for so
long. She’d stepped away from camp to collect firewood and as she picked up suitable branches she repeated the names of those gone and the one that still remained.

“Does a girl want a gift?”

Arya whipped around, surprised to see the face she never thought she would again. The voice had scared her, as well as the fact that she was rarely snuck up on these days. She paled, hoping the man wasn’t here to collect her face. Her hand flew to Needle. “What is a man doing here?”

He held his hands out. “A man merely comes with a gift to his most disappointing student. A name from the girl’s list.”

Arya kept her hand on her sword hilt, but had to admit she was intrigued. “Which name?”

“Cersei.”

Cersei Lannister. Why was she having her face stolen? She asked a man as such.

“The Iron Bank will have its due,” he answered.

Arya smirked.

Tyrion never liked forges. They were too hot, and it seemed too easy to be permanently injured. Besides those very good points, he had never been interested in weaponry. So he mostly avoided them.

But he needed answers, ones his books wouldn’t be able to provide. Gendry Waters had been an apprentice to Tobho Mott, a master with Valyrian steel. He was the closest thing to an expert that Tyrion had when it came to what he’d learned. So he walked into the too warm space to find the bastard he needed.

He found the blacksmith cooling a blade in hot water, the steam rising off it. Tyrion frowned, “Why are you making steel swords? They don’t kill the enemy.”

If Gendry was surprised to find the Hand here, he didn’t show it. “Swords still kill men. The new army is going after them, I hear.”

Tyrion nodded. Now seeing the variety of swords in the shop, Essos designs rather than Westeros ones. “They paying well?”

“Sellswords always pay well. Their lives revolve around what I forge.”

Tyrion thought of Bronn, who’d always joked the only things in life worth paying well for were swords and whores, and women could be bought cheap if a man had the time to haggle. He smiled at the thought of his old friend. He pressed on, walking around the tub of water to follow the blacksmith. “Are you familiar with magic at all?”

Gendry’s eyebrow raised. “Nope, why?”

Tyrion sighed. “I wanted to know if it was possible to forge magic into steel.”
Gendry shrugged, “I wouldn’t know. I just make swords. If anyone enchants them, well, that’s on them.”

“What about Master Mott? He was a master with Valyrian steel. Did he ever use magic when he repaired those swords?”

Gendry set down the sword he had been working on to give Tyrion his full attention. “Not that I ever saw. Why are you asking these questions?”

Tyrion tried to think of a lie that didn’t make them sound desperate, but was saved by a cloaked man entering. The Hand stood back so another sellsword could speak with the blacksmith.

But to his surprise, this sellsword was seeking the Hand. He turned to the smaller man and threw his hood back, revealing Bronn. “I got what you asked for,” he said.

At first Tyrion couldn’t remember what the man was talking about, then he did and nodded. He turned to Gendry. “That’s for your help. I must be going.”

He walked out, indicating to Bronn to follow. The former knight followed, “What are you doing in a forge?”

“Nevermind that,” Tyrion dismissed. “Where is the…” Tyrion coughed.

Bronn looked around. “Lots of folk around here. I’m keeping him some place safe, until I get my money.”

Tyrion didn’t know why he was surprised. He wondered how much he’d be forced to pay for the alchemist they needed for their plans at the Neck.

How much did saving the realm cost to a man who only cared for himself?

The wine warmed the queen’s belly, it was the only comfort Cersei had these days. She sometimes worried about the pooch beginning to develop around her once smooth, flat stomach, but she just drank more to forget such things.

“They have lost Winterfell?” Cersei grinned at the thought. The North lost its stronghold. It was weak, ripe for her taking. The monsters fought each other, and she would sweep in at the end and claim all. She thought of her father, how proud he would be of her. He should have raised her as his son instead of selling her off as a daughter. She had been the only child worthy of him.

Fuck him, she thought. She had become queen. Tywin Lannister had never been king. She had superseded her father in every way. She was his better. She was everyone’s better. The wine was a rich vintage, she noticed, as she tossed aside reports of more food riots in Flea Bottom. What did the lion care for sheep?

Only dragons concerned her, and they would be dead once more soon enough.

Qyburn continued his report. Her small council was just him, Euron and what remained of the Mountain these days. Her Master of Whispers had told her that his birds were singing less these days. Ever since Varys had gone north. Cersei knew it couldn’t be a coincidence. She listened as
her Hand told her that the Dragon Queen was pregnant.

It didn’t concern Cersei, even as her hand went to her belly, to her own empty womb. Jaime, she thought before ruthlessly suppressing the thought of him. Her only beloved. “We’ll have to kill her before her bastard is born then.”

“The babe won’t be a bastard. The Bastard King and Dragon Queen have already married.”

Cersei couldn’t say she was surprised. Of course the little witch had seduced the northern king with her cunt. Cersei could even respect it to an extent. It was so easy to control men. “That just means we’ll need to kill him too.”

Euron said very little during these meetings, but he spoke up at that. “How are you planning to do that? By sending in an army or an assassin?”

Cersei thought about it as she drank. Robert’s assassins had never managed to kill the dragon bitch. Jamie’s army hadn’t managed to kill her. How did one kill a dragon?

She didn’t need to kill the dragon, she realized. Just a wolf. Her family excelled at that skill. She smiled. “We’ll kill the king first, the queen will follow.”

Qyburn bowed at the command, but Euron remained skeptical. “That didn’t answer my question.”

Cersei hated this man. If she didn’t need him, she would have his head removed from his shoulders for daring to question her. She forced herself to calm down. She needed him for now, but soon her enemies would be gone and she would be rid of this damned pirate king. Euron stood and walked to her with that swagger that irritated her. She wanted to pull back as he leaned into her space, wanted to punish him for daring to touch her.

But she needed him. So she let him paw her. “We should do the same, ensure any of our children aren’t bastards.” His hand brushed over her breast.

Cersei would never marry him. She knew what Euron really wanted, her throne. He would kill her once he had a clean claim. She understood the great game better than anyone. She looked up at him with a smile, “Deliver the King in the North’s head to me, and I’ll reward you.”

Euron grinned and Cersei thought, men were so stupid, seeing only want they wanted to see and hearing only what pleased them.

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